

NOVEL
8

Written by
Rifujin na
Magonote

Illustrated by
Shirotaka

Mushoku Tensei

jobless reincarnation



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WRITTEN BY
Rifujin na
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ILLUSTRATED BY
Shirotaka



Fitz

Zanoba

Rudeus

Linia

Pursena

Juliette

**DRAMATIS
PERSONAE**

Rudeus Greyrat CHRONOLOGY

ARMORED DRAGON YEAR 407

Rudeus is born to Paul and Zenith Greyrat in Buena Village, part of the Asura Kingdom's Fittoa Region. Roxy Migurdia becomes his tutor when he is 3. He becomes a Saint-tier water magician at 5, and begins teaching magic to Sylphiette, an elf with mixed blood.



At age 7, Rudeus is invited to the house of the Fittoa Region's liege lord to serve as tutor to his granddaughter, Eris Boreas Greyrat, teaching her magic, arithmetic, reading and writing.



During the Displacement Incident, Rudeus is teleported to the Demon Continent with Eris. There, he befriends Ruijerd of the Superd Tribe and becomes an adventurer, traveling from the Demon Continent to the Central Continent.

ARMORED DRAGON YEAR 414



ARMORED DRAGON YEAR 417

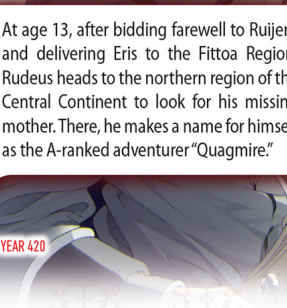


ARMORED DRAGON YEAR 419

During the journey, Rudeus is reunited with his father, Paul, and sister, Norn, in the Holy Country of Millis. He also rescues his stepmother Lilia and half-sister Aisha after they were taken captive in the Shirone Kingdom.

At age 13, after bidding farewell to Ruijerd and delivering Eris to the Fittoa Region, Rudeus heads to the northern region of the Central Continent to look for his missing mother. There, he makes a name for himself as the A-ranked adventurer "Quagmire."

ARMORED DRAGON YEAR 420



Mushoku Tensei

jobless reincarnation

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ILLUSTRATED BY
Shirotaka



Seven Seas Entertainment

MUSHOKU TENSEI ~ISEKAI ITTARA HONKI DASU~ VOL. 8

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Illustrations by Shirotaka

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*"If you want to suffer, then keep moving forward
in life. If you want to enjoy yourself, then go in
any other direction."*

—After pain awaits true prosperity.

AUTHOR: RUDEUS GREYRAT

TRANSLATION: JEAN RF MAGOTT

Prologue: Quagmire, The Adventurer

IT HAD BEEN FIVE YEARS since the calamity commonly known as the Fittoa Region Displacement Incident. The liege lord of Fittoa, Sauros Boreas Greyrat, was dead, as was his son Philip Boreas Greyrat, the mayor of the Citadel of Roa, and Philip's wife. Not long after, it was reported that Philip's daughter, Eris Boreas Greyrat, had died as well. As a result, the high-ranking minister Darius Silva Ganius cut off funding to the Fittoa Region's efforts to track down its missing citizens. While some individuals continued the search on their own, the Search and Rescue Squad was officially disbanded. The refugee camp switched focus from searching for survivors to reclaiming their livelihoods.

As far as the Asura Kingdom was concerned, the Displacement Incident was over. Those who'd experienced it first-hand, however, were far from done.

Year Four-Hundred and Twenty-Two of the Armored Dragon.

The Duchy of Basherant, a prominent country in the northwest of the Central Continent, was one of the three Great Magic Nations. Its third largest city was Pipin, and in this city lived an adventurer who had become the talk of the town. He was known on the streets as Quagmire.

The man in question had been teleported a great distance during the Displacement Incident, and spent several years trying to return to the Fittoa Region. Upon his return, he—like many others—despaired at the disaster's aftermath. He traveled to the northern part of the Central Continent, also known as the Northern Territories, in search of a still-missing family member, where he scoured each country in turn while working as an adventurer.

Quagmire's mornings began early. As a deeply religious man, he was up before dawn to offer quiet prayer to a relic of his God, which was tucked away in a small box. But this was no sacrament of the Millis faith. In fact, those of the Millis faith would likely raise an eyebrow at the object of his worship. Regardless, he looked the picture of piety with his head bent in prayer.

After his morning prayers, Quagmire would change into athletic attire and run laps around the town. As he would say, "I may be a magician, but before that, I'm an adventurer. And an adventurer has to be able to move when the necessity arises." After about an hour of running, he would commence on a special training ritual from his hometown, the likes of which had never been seen in the Duchy of Basherant. He would lie prone with his belly on the ground and lift himself up by the arms, and he would do this a hundred times. Then he would lie on his back and lift his upper body toward his knees another hundred times. Once that was finished, he'd crouch and stand yet another hundred times. He did this routine daily, without fail.

"My muscles get jealous. If I don't pay attention to them every day, they get all huffy with me. Just like a woman. Although, unlike a woman, they won't just suddenly go off and disappear on me. Muscles don't betray you. Isn't that right, Hulk, Hercules?"

Quagmire, a man who named his own body parts, would say this with a laugh—one that seemed a bit lonesome.

Finishing his morning workout around the time the rest of the town was waking up, Quagmire headed to the cafeteria on the first floor of his inn for breakfast. Adventurers were said to eat double or triple the portions of an average person. That said, food was expensive in the Northern Region, so many practiced moderation—but Quagmire was not one of them. He ate perhaps twenty percent more than most people did, devouring heaping bowls of cooked rice and bean dishes. A hearty breakfast was the source of his power.

After breakfast, he headed for the Adventurers' Guild—a spot in the middle of the town where other rugged types gathered. Eyes turned to him as he entered. Quagmire didn't have a party of his own, preferring to team up with others on a case-by-case basis to tackle difficult missions. There was high demand for a magician as exceptional as Quagmire.

As usual, the leader of an S-ranked party hit him up today. “Yo, Quagmire, did you hear? There’s a Red Wyrms straggler up north!”

This was Soldat Heckler, an S-ranked adventurer. He was a man with deeply chiseled features characteristic of those who lived in the north, who possessed Advanced-tier skills in the Sword God Style and Intermediate-tier skills in the Water God Style, and who was a famous adventurer in these parts. He led a party known as Stepped Leader, one of the many parties controlled by the clan Thunderbolt, which worked all across the lands of Basherant.

Stepped Leader had six members: two swordsmen, one warrior, two healing magicians, and one offensive magician. They’d had seven people at one point, but a magician had kicked the bucket. They were a bit low on firepower as a result, and Soldat would occasionally solicit Quagmire to join them for real. “Hey, Quagmire. Isn’t it about time you became one of us for real? You’re comfortable working with us, right?”

However, Quagmire would simply shake his head. “No. Now that I’ve gotten famous here, I’ll be moving on to the next country soon.”

Quagmire was searching for his mother. He knew very well that finding a single person in a world this vast, five years since the Displacement Incident, was going to be a tough challenge. He’d elected to make a name for himself everywhere he went, meticulously scouring his surroundings as he worked from country to country, hoping that if he got famous enough, his mother might be the one to find him instead.

“Oh, but I will go with you to eliminate the Red Wyrms.” Quagmire accepted Soldat’s request. Successfully dispatching a dragon would add to his fame; this lined right up with his objectives. He promptly headed to the counter to register himself with the party. “But it can’t be just us, right??”

“We’re gonna get some more people together after this. This is our first big job in a long time. Everyone’s all rarin’ to go.”

Dragon slaying quests were always carried out by multiple parties—it would be tantamount to suicide for a party to attempt it alone. This time, five parties had announced their intent to participate in the raid. They were:

The S-ranked party Stepped Leader.

The A-ranked party Rod Knights.

The A-ranked party Iron Cluster Corps.

The A-ranked party Cave A Mond.

The A-ranked party The Drunkard's Nonsense.

Twenty-five adventurers in total, a bit short of the seven parties spread out over forty people that was the minimum recommended number for dragon slaying. Soldat was getting flustered. At this rate, the quest was going to slip right through their fingers.

"Hey, hey, this is a Red Wyrm we're talkin' about here! You're gonna get a thousand gold all in one go for a quest like this, so why aren't there more people?! Aren't you all A-ranked?! Where the hell are the other S-ranked parties?!"

"I heard a labyrinth was recently discovered in the east," someone volunteered. "They probably all went to check it out."

Another man sighed. "We're going to drop out. There's no way this is going to work."

The four members of Cave A Mond withdrew, leaving them with twenty-one people. It seemed inevitable that the rest would follow suit, but just as everyone was preparing to disband, Soldat spoke up. "Alright, twenty-one people!" he declared with authority. "That just means we each get a bigger cut!"

The gathered adventurers looked nervous, but none of them dared oppose his words.

All twenty-one of them walked through the barren, snow-dusted land of the Northern Region. Trees had lost their leaves and their branches were peppered with white. Soon, the long winter would begin.

"Quagmire, do some scouting for us."

"Sure."

Following Soldat's orders, Quagmire conjured a pillar to boost him into the air. Surveying their surroundings from his perch, he relayed what he saw. Red Wyrms were huge. As long as they periodically scanned the area, there was no way they'd miss it.

"Hm." It seemed Quagmire had found something. "Luster Grizzlies coming in at two-o'clock. There's a swarm of them. They're kicking up a huge cloud of snow!"

“How many?”

“Eight... no, ten of them! They’ve noticed us! They’re headed straight for us, and fast!”

They weren’t here to kill grizzlies. Their target was a Red Wyrms, and since there were so few of them, they couldn’t afford to waste their energy fighting pointless monsters. Still, when your clothes caught fire, you had no choice but to stop, drop and roll.

“Everyone, scatter! Quagmire, come back down. Cover for us!”

“Got it!”

At Soldat’s order, the four parties spread out, planning to ambush the herd of monstrous bears as they moved in.

“Quagmire!”

“Yep!”

On Soldat’s command, Quagmire instantaneously conjured an incredibly sticky pool of mud before him. Just as his nickname implied, he was skilled at casting the Quagmire spell. The herd of grizzlies sloshed into the unexpected bog, and their movements slowed.

“Now!”

The adventurers attacked as one. As you’d expect from warriors this highly ranked, they were swift, downing one beast after the other. It was kill or be killed: their lives or their enemies’. No mercy was shown.

However, when just a few of the grizzlies remained, a cry rose up. “Hey, the Red Wyrms! It’s coming!”

“That’s what the grizzlies were running from! Argh!”

“Hey, Quagmire! What the hell is this?! You weren’t slackin’ off, were ya?!”

“I couldn’t see it through the cloud of snow!”

Their plan had been to spot the wyrm from afar and launch a surprise attack. Instead, they’d been caught off guard by a surprise attack themselves. They didn’t stand a chance. Red Wyrms were normally flying creatures, but their strong limbs made them lighter on their feet than you might think, and they were powerful foes even on the ground.

“Shit! Retreat! Retreat!”

Amid the chaos, Quagmire sprang into action. “I’m going to cast a smokescreen! Everyone, separate and run! Deep Mist!”

Quagmire was calm. He wielded fire magic with practiced ease, melting snow to create a wall of water vapor—an impromptu smokescreen using the natural resources around him. The wyrm, however, was cunning. It was wise enough to identify the primary threat to it and eliminate them first, which meant that Quagmire was now its target.

“...gah!”

He ran in the opposite direction from his comrades. If the enemy was focused on him, then it was his duty to use that to give his comrades time to flee.

Quagmire was nimble, light on his feet, as he led the red wyrm in circles. His daily training was coming in handy. Fire ignited in the wyrm’s mouth as it ran out of patience, and flames poured forth, bathing their surroundings in fire in the blink of an eye. This was one of the creature’s unique skills: fire breath. A living creature caught in the trajectory would be fried to a crisp.

So, was Quagmire dead then?

No—he was still alive! He’d quickly conjured an enormous wall of water to protect himself, and was still moving, cutting through the curtain of water vapor rising through the air. Ignoring the embers singing the edges of his robe, he created a stone cannon and launched this earthen bullet at high velocity.

It pierced the wyrm’s scales. “Graaaah!” the creature shrieked.

Quagmire lobbed shots at the creature, one after another. The red wyrm evaded several, but they were coming hard and fast, and eventually, the creature turned tail and ran. It was a clever beast. It understood quickly there was great power hidden within the small vessel that was Quagmire.

Quagmire didn’t pursue. Was he really going to let such perfect prey get away? For a moment that seemed to be the case, until...

“Gu-graaaah!” the beast roared.

It had run straight into the pool of goop from before, sinking fast into the sticky mud. Quagmire channeled more mana into the swampy

water, and as the wyrm struggled to break free, the goo clung to it even more firmly than before.

“Ooh, it got stuck in there,” Quagmire mumbled, sounding surprised as he finished the dragon with an enormous stone cannon.

The other adventurers, who had scattered when the chaos began, returned one by one. “Damn, Quagmire, you really are strong.”

“Looks like it wasn’t all talk when you said you travelled the Demon Continent.”

“I always thought you were strong, but I can’t believe you actually beat that thing!”

Quagmire, who knew arrogance bred discord, didn’t let the praise go to his head. “Well, it was already hurt. Anyway, help me butcher this thing and divide up the spoils. Everyone, take what you can.”

“Are you sure? You basically killed it all alone, you know?”

“Nonsense... Besides, I can’t carry this all alone, and if we leave it here, it’ll attract other monsters. Take what you can, and we’ll burn the rest. We don’t want it turning into a dragon zombie.”

With that, the quest that should have been a seven-day roundtrip had been completed in a single day. Quagmire’s share of the loot—scales, bones, and even meat from the red wyrm—sold for a small fortune. He returned to the inn with a full coin purse, ate a more modest meal than he usually did for breakfast, and then retired to his room, where the pious man gave thanks to his God for having made it safely through the day. This ritual of his would look peculiar to the uninitiated, but it was important to him.

And so, Quagmire’s day came to an end. Tomorrow, he would resume his search for his family once more.

Rudeus

IT HAPPENED when I was eating dinner at the pub one night. By myself, of course. Eating was a one-person affair. I was alone and wealthy. But not lonely, okay, not at all! I mean, if anything, I hated crowds.

“It was then! Then that the Red Wyrm appeared!”

Three troubadours performed upon the pub's stage. One stood in front and told the story in a clear, bell-like tone, while the other two matched their music to his rhythm, throwing in sound effects here and there.

Troubadour: a career where one stood on a stage, sang, and played music for tips. In bigger towns, troubadours signed exclusive contracts with theaters. Many were adventurers who turned their experiences into song, or composed epics from interesting tales they heard from others. The concept of copyright hadn't really made it to this world, so troubadours regularly rearranged each other's songs, and even collaborated with each other on hybrid material. Some went so far as to team up with those who played different instruments, and form a band to travel the world together—of course, the ones who did so had some martial prowess, too. Adventurers who could sing, dance and fight—these were what people called troubadours in this world.

I'd seen these three on stage before, at the Adventurers' Guild. They were a C-ranked party called Big Boys Orchestra; a wonderful name that spoke to their desire for popularity. Unfortunately, their skills were a bit lacking. Despite that, they kept churning out new material, and had even quizzed me extensively about the dragon slaying quest I completed several days ago. The song they were singing right now was based on that story. Almost like a YouTuber with a song cover predictably titled 'My Attempt At __'. Wait, that's not quite right.

Music had never been my thing, even in my previous life. I'd once tried to create a song on Vocaloid, but failed miserably. Since then, I'd told people the only instrument I could play was the ass drum. And by play, I mean slapping my ass with both hands. What these troubadours were doing—creating something new based on what I'd told them, and performing it—was something I could never do. Their skills might need polishing, but I had to acknowledge their creativity.

Unfortunately, the group's lead was singing the tale of my adventure in a tone of voice that made them sound like an old village storyteller, or the narrator of a documentary. I found it interesting, but the bland tone wasn't going down so well with the rest of the audience. Someone jeered, calling it boring and demanding they play something else.

That's cold, bro. Especially when the protagonist of the song is sitting right here.

Bam!

The door to the pub swung open. Freezing air came billowing in. Everyone's gazes turned. My body shook.

"I've finally found you, Rudeus the Quagmire!"

The new arrival was an elf with long hair in thick ringlets. She had the look of an adventurer, but was garbed in a dress, with a backpack and a sword and shield upon her hip. Her face was, in one word, beautiful. She had large, narrowed eyes, pointed ears, and radiant blonde hair. She was also incredibly thin, with a flat chest—and did I mention the ears? She was truly the perfect picture of an elf.

And she was pointing at me. Everyone's eyes turned my way.

"Gah! So you were here after all, Quagmire..." The guy who'd jeered earlier looked disgusted, but I considerably ignored him. I was generous, after all.

"So you've finally found me, eh..." I said nonchalantly to the elf, even though I had no idea who the heck she was. I hadn't done anything in the past few years that might give someone reason to hold a grudge against me. I'd helped people, avoided fights, and been careful not to attract the wrong kind of attention. This was the first time a beautiful woman had sought me out, but maybe I'd done enough general good that people were now seeking me out to give thanks?

Somehow, I didn't think that was it.

"You stick out like a sore thumb, just like I was told you would. I found you immediately!"

"Wait, you said 'finally' just a second ago, didn't you?"

"I thought you would be further east," she said, her beautiful eyes staring straight at me. For some reason, there was drool trickling from her mouth. She licked it away.

What, had she fallen for me instantly? Was her mouth watering at the sight of the athletic physique I'd recently built up? Hehehe, well, I *had* been getting fit lately. Plus I was right in the middle of puberty, and starting to bulk up.

"What's wrong?"

"No, no, nothing at all!" The elf woman cleared her throat and took a seat beside me.

The pub erupted in oohs and aahs. I hear people whisper, “To think Quagmire had a woman all this time!”

I couldn’t believe it, either. It was enough of a shock to bring tears to my eyes.

“Phew.” She put her backpack down and noisily scooted her chair toward me. She was close. I mean *really* close. Close enough that if I were a virgin, I might’ve mistakenly thought she liked me. *That’s dangerous, Miss. If you fall for me, you’ll get burned.*

“My name is Elinalise, Elinalise Dragonroad. I’m your father Paul’s former party member—”

“Oh.” was it. Paul’s friend, huh? So that was it. She’d probably come bearing some kind of message.

“—and I’m also Roxy’s friend.”

“What! My teacher! Where is she?” I leaned forward in my seat, excited to hear someone else say Roxy’s name for the first time in a long time. Praying to her had been the only thing keeping me going these past few years.

“More importantly!” Instead of answering the number-one question on my mind, Elinalise leaned close enough to kiss me, and put her lips to my ear. “I heard you killed a Red Wyrms all by yourself, didn’t you?”

“Y-yeah, well, it was basically at death’s door, anyway.”

“Now I understand why Roxy was so proud of you.”

Well, it hadn’t been an easy fight. It wouldn’t be an exaggeration to say it had had the least room for error of all the requests I’d taken in these past few years. It still paled in comparison to my confrontation with the Dragon God Orsted, though. Once you’d experienced something that extreme, you found yourself being strangely calm about other things by comparison.

“I’m tickled pink to hear my teacher’s been boasting about me... No, that actually tickles. What are you doing?”

“Touching your chest. You’re very strong.” Elinalise was fingering my upper arms and chest. Still, it wasn’t a bad feeling, being told how strong I was. Her finger brushed the pendant Lilia had given me. “My, my, how quaint. Who gave you this?”

“Our maid.”

“Maid? Are they an elf?”

“Huh? No, they’re not. My, my, why are you asking about that?” I said. Oops. Now I was even talking like her.

“That’s not important.” Elinalise didn’t seem bothered by my slip-up. She showed me the sheath that had been hanging from her hip. It had a pendant attached to it with the same shape as mine, albeit far more elaborately made. An amateur had made mine, while hers was clearly crafted by someone skilled, “We match,” she said, snuggling up against me.

She’d been awfully touchy since she walked in. “What’s going on here? Do you actually like me?”

“Yes, you’re a good man. More so than I anticipated. I’m surprised. I thought you’d be more of a child, but... you’re so muscular, it’s *wooonderful*.”

She was probably just messing with me, but it kind of got my heart thumping. “Uhhhm... heh, you’re quite beautiful yourself, miss.”

I wasn’t going to get all flustered, like some kind of virgin. I slipped my finger under her chin and tilted it up. When I did so, she softly closed her eyes, as if she were waiting for a kiss. Just I started to wonder just what kind of joke this was, her hand slipped around the back of my head.

Seriously? I was definitely feeling some sexual vibes here, but, uh? Was that okay? Was I really free to give her a big sloppy smooch?

The moment I thought that, her eyes flew open. “Oh no, I can’t. Shame on me.”

“Please don’t tease me like that,” I complained.

“I do *not* tease men. But I also have no intention of becoming Paul’s daughter, and I want to continue being Roxy’s friend, too.”

...what the hell? So she and the rest of the party had fought with Paul before they split up, a long time ago, and as a result, she couldn’t bring herself to date his son? Well, whatever, it didn’t matter. I had no intention of dating anyone again, anytime soon.

“So then, Miss Elinalise, do you have some business with me?”

“Yes. I’ve brought you good news.”

“Good news?”

Elinalise grinned at me.

That was the day I learned that Zenith’s whereabouts had been confirmed.

Chapter 1: Letter of Invitation

A WEEK AFTER I LEARNED where Zenith was, I was still at the inn in Basherant. She was apparently in the Labyrinth City of Rapan, somewhere in the center of the Begaritt Continent, and as much as I wanted to set out immediately, that was far from here. I had no idea how many months it would take to make the journey on foot. It might even take over a year.

Besides, winter would be here soon, and that was a harsh season in the Northern Territories. The snow piled up as high as five meters deep, and while the country cleared local roads to some degree, crossing the border would be difficult. I could use magic to stop the snowfall and thaw the ground, but I didn't know all the roads, and I couldn't avert the weather forever.

And so, I was staying put for the time being. Besides, according to Elinalise, Zenith was having a merry old time going dungeon-diving. I suspected she was just saying that to reassure me, but she had said there was no need for me to hurry, and that Paul and Roxy were already headed that way. Paul didn't inspire much confidence, but if Roxy was headed to my mother, then I could relax for the moment. Better to wait for winter to end before I made a move.

"Alright, let's do some more training today."

And so, I started the day with my usual workout routine. Snow or no snow, I could still do my weight training. I'd never stuck with exercise for very long in my previous life, but for whatever reason, my current body was keeping up well.

No point in overthinking it. I should just be grateful I can train like this everyday, I told myself as I changed and headed out to start running.

Today was a holiday, so I'd set myself a slightly difficult course. First, I did a lap around the city. The compacted snow was slippery, raising the risk of slipping and twisting my leg; this would be important adventurer training. Once I finished my lap around the city I headed for the outer wall, a stone construct about four to five meters high, which I

used magic to climb. Adventurers sometimes needed to get to higher ground quickly, so I was training for that contingency, too.

I spotted one of the soldiers on lookout. “Oh, good morning!”

“Whoa?! Oh, it’s you, Quagmire. Hard at work, I see! You have the day off today, then?”

“Yeah, I’m training again today.”

“Well, you are a hard worker. Ah, that’s right—fix the wall for us next time, won’t you? I’ll buy you dinner.”

“If you give me permission to grope your daughter’s breasts, I’d be happy to even rebuild your house for you.”

“Hey now...” he started.

“I’m just teasing.”

I greeted the other soldiers on the outer wall, then leapt off on the other side. There, I did another lap around the city’s perimeter. Unlike the city, which was periodically plowed, snow had built up outside, so I had to use fire magic to melt a path I could run on. This was also a part of training. It might seem to be a skill with limited use, but there had been that one time I’d struggled to get through that snow-laden forest.

“Huff... huff...”

Once I finished my lap, I started practicing with the wooden sword I’d carried with me. I knew this wasn’t really necessary for a magician, but I still made it part of my daily routine. It seemed to be largely accepted that magicians were physically powerless, but that didn’t sit right with me. I might not be a swordsman, but there were plenty of occasions when a bit of upper body strength came in handy, like when hauling my luggage. I could always entrust the duty to someone else, but I thought it best to be able to handle it myself.

“Hah! Yah! Ho!”

After finishing my usual sword drills, plus those that Paul and Ghislaine had taught me, I proceeded to simulate a mock battle. I decided to imagine Ruijerd as my opponent today. I was much too slow to be a match for him, of course. I’d never beat him unless I kept training—in fact, I might never beat him at all, no matter how much I trained. But that didn’t bother me. Beating him wasn’t my goal.

Once I was done, I took the same route home.

When I made it back to the inn, Elinalise thrust her head out of a second-floor window. “Ah... my, my, it’s you Ru—ah!—deus. Welcome back.”

Something was off about her. Her hands were hooked onto the window ledge, and as her face contorted, her body shook with a rhythm. Moans of, “Mm, mm,” slipped out as she tried to hold in her voice. Plus, her shoulders were completely bare.

“Thank you, Miss Elinalise. Looks like you’re having a lively morning.”

“What? Lively? I-I’m afraid I don’t know what you’re talking ab— aah!”

I was sure there was a guy inside that room, giving her you-know-what from behind. Opening a window for some fancy kinks when it was this cold outside... Lively, indeed.

“It’s freezing outside, so please be careful not to catch a cold.” I pulled my gaze away from her and went inside, heading toward my room.

It had dawned on me this past week that Elinalise was a massive slut. It had startled me at first, but now, I was used to it. The woman had a man in her room basically every day. Her very existence was a sex crime.

Of course, I didn’t judge her for it. In fact, I’d love to participate if I could. But that wasn’t going to happen, because for the past two years I’d been afflicted with a certain sickness. A sickness of the mind and body. Let’s use a plant bulb as an example. When that plant bulb sees mountains or valleys, it blossoms. Its shoot rises toward the heavens and grows into a stem so strong that rain and wind can’t bring it down, with a magnificent flower at its tip. Then, when the time is right, it spreads its white seeds everywhere. However, my bulb wasn’t growing and its flower wasn’t blossoming.

Ah, screw it, I’ll just say it. I had ED. And no, we’re not talking about the extra dynamic cassette tape. My little man had stopped standing to attention after Eris and I broke up, as I’d found out when a fellow adventurer approached me during the period I was trying to get my name out there. I’d ogled her happily as I took her back to my inn, but my little buddy wouldn’t stand up when it came to it. She ended up

leaving in a huff.

I'd done everything I could to fix it. Soldat had even taken me with him to the red-light district, where my heart had pounded as a woman serviced me. Ultimately it was a failure, however. My tulip wouldn't bloom, but silently drooped, instead. On top of that... no, let's just stop there.

It had been quite the shock. I'd been an absolute wreck. I'd pulled myself together with time, and tried again, to no avail. My useless friend had remained unusable. I still appreciated the sight of an attractive woman, but no ripples went up and down my spinal cord, and my lower half remained silent. As time went on, I was overcome by a pervasive sense of loneliness and helplessness, and after one too many failures, I gave up. I no longer thought of this as a problem someone else could help me solve. There was no one I liked enough to try. If all my attempts at romance were going to end in betrayal, I was better off just admiring from afar. I didn't need to hope for anything more than that, even though just getting a taste always left you wanting more.

All I had to do was make the most of flying solo. I didn't need comrades. I hated crowds.

Although, lately, I hadn't even been able to coax my little friend into flying solo... Not that I was all broken up about it, of course!

"Hah..."

I returned to my room. After warming the air with magic, I conjured some hot water and wiped the sweat off my covered body. Then I got changed and stepped out, thinking about grabbing a bite to eat.

"Oh!"

"Oh."

I ran into Elinalise, who'd just finished her business. The person with his arm wrapped around her shoulder was the same one I'd been working alongside these past few years—Soldat. He immediately went pale the moment he saw my face. "No, it's not what you think, Rudeus... I had no intention of putting my hands on your woman."

"No, it's not what *you* think, Soldat. She is absolutely not my woman. Besides, you know that mine isn't in working condition, right?"

"Oh, yeah, that's right, uh... sorry, for rubbin' salt in your

wounds, then. I didn't mean to start somethin'. Besides, you made me a lot of money not too long ago."

"It's fine," I assured him. "By the way, was it good?"

"Yeah, it was the best," he said, face melting into an expression of bliss.

"Tch." I clicked my tongue in dismay, even though I was the one who asked the question. "Well, you heard him, Miss Elinalise. Good for you."

"Well, of course it was. Anyone who's been with me leaves happy."

"...oh, really."

I knew she'd already had her fill of numerous other men from Soldat's party—each of them had come to me with their own apology and boastful story about their tryst. I didn't really need the apologies, but did they know what their buddies were up to? Wouldn't someone eventually find out and chaos ensue?

Ah, well...not my problem. I was keeping my nose clear, as I'd done these past two years. I'd done nothing to invite anyone's ire, and I'd started no fights. In other words...

"Miss Elinalise."

"Yes, what is it?"

"You're free to enjoy yourself, but please deal with the aftermath on your own, okay?"

That was right—self-preservation. Soldat and his team had looked out for me, but I wanted nothing to do with the entanglements that issued around other people's crotches.

"Of course."

"Hey, what's that all about?" Based on his expression, Soldat had no idea what we were talking about.

Elinalise planted a kiss on his cheek and guided him down the stairs. "Nothing at all. Come, let's go have something to eat."

What a cruel woman.

Elinalise Dragonroad was one of Paul's former party members. Apparently, she'd teamed up with Roxy to search for Paul's family in the wake of the Displacement Incident. They'd traveled across the Demon Continent together, and then, Elinalise had made her way alone to the Central Continent, while Roxy went to tell Paul about Zenith's whereabouts. In other words, if not for Elinalise's selfish whims, the person with me right now could've been Roxy. Dammit.

No—I should be grateful. They could have all gone to Millishion and left me on my own. I could see Roxy once I made it to Begaritt. No need to be impatient.

Elinalise was an S-ranked warrior. The two of us took on an elimination quest together once, and as expected of an S-rank, she was good. Her attack power was a bit lacking, but she was insanely good at tanking. She had to be right in the top tier of warriors out there—though not the best. The best would always be Ruijerd, in my eyes, even if it was a bit unfair to compare her to him.

She had a regal, elven beauty, with radiant gold hair set in magnificent long curls. Her soft demeanor and distinct way with words stroked men's egos; by gazing right into their eyes, and touching them with little caresses, she disarmed them without even trying. Every little motion she made was primed to seduce, like when she first approached me, and I thought, oh? Has she fallen for me? Her prowess in the bedroom was clearly impressive, too, because almost all the men who spent a night with her were completely exhausted the next day.

That said, she didn't ignore or condescend to other women. She played the part of an older sister to the younger girls, giving them relationship advice, teaching them how to draw men in, and protecting them in combat. She never tried to seduce a man who already had a partner. You might consider that her way of trying to set boundaries: everything had its time and place. If you overlooked her small breasts, she was perfect.

Of course, her sexual appetites were still insatiable. One by one, she devoured all the single men around her. It was like watching a fuse burn down. You had no idea how long the fuse was, but some day it was going to run out and set off a huge explosion—by which I mean prideful adventurers getting into a lover's quarrel. Elinalise was charismatic enough to make sure the fallout never escalated into

bloodshed, but, as you might expect, she never stayed in one party for very long. She was infamous among the male adventurers of the southern region of the Central Continent, so much so that there was an unspoken rule about not allowing her to join a party unless under special circumstances.

On that note—she was currently partied up with me. “If you’re going to the Begaritt Continent, then I have to make sure you get there safely,” she’d said, and I hadn’t objected. The past two years had taught me how difficult it could be to travel alone. Elinalise was skilled in battle, and would be a good partner...except for the part where she would nestle up against me while I was eating, and run her hands all over me. That part was a bit irritating. If not for my ED, I would have loved to return the favor by feeling her up.

“Mister Soldat, you can’t do that. Rudeus is watching.”

“Come on, can’t I? Just a little.”

“My, my, such a naughty boy...”

Currently, she was getting all lovey-dovey with Soldat in front of me. Why were we even eating at the same table? I bet she just wanted to show off. *Dammit, it’s not like I’m envious or anything!*

Soldat was sweet and caring with Elinalise, as were the rest of his party members. With a reverse harem like that, how was she possibly avoiding any drama? Not that I cared, as long as none of the pitchforks were pointed my way. I kind of wanted to get to the bottom of this before things went sour, but I had very little experience being in this kind of position, and it felt like it would be kicking the hornet’s nest to try.

“Alright then, here you are,” Elinalise said to Soldat. “The money I promised.”

“Gotcha. I have to say, I’m sorry about this—I enjoy our time together so much that getting money for it just feels kinda...”

“Just make sure you don’t get serious about me, and we’ll call it even,” she replied, handing the money over.

So that’s her secret. Almost like a kind of reverse prostitution, I thought. Well, in that case, there shouldn’t be any problems.

...right?

Our lives continued like that for another month. Then, one day, a letter arrived for me. Written on the firmly sealed envelope were the words *Ranoa University of Magic*.

What the heck is this? I thought to myself as I broke the seal and peeked at the contents.

To Lord Rudeus Greyrat,

Greetings. I am Jenius, the Vice Principal of Ranoa University of Magic.

Recently, the name of Rudeus the Quagmire has gained prominence in the Kingdom of Ranoa. I hear you're a highly skilled adventurer who can cast spells without incantations. On further investigation, I also discovered that you seem to be a pupil of the Water King Magician Roxy.

Have you any desire to polish your incredible magical skills? I've made preparations to welcome you as a special student at Ranoa University. As a special student, you would be exempt from tuition as well as class attendance requirements, while having access to the main school library and facilities, to support you conducting your own research.

If you are able to complete one research project within seven years (by the time you graduate), and transfer the rights to your findings over to the University or the Magicians' Guild, you will be enrolled in the Magicians' Guild as a C-ranked member. Of course, even if your research bears no significant fruits, you will still be registered as a D-ranked Guild member with the rest of the graduates.

I would deeply appreciate an opportunity to introduce myself to you. I apologize for the abruptness of this request, but ask that you consider my offer.

*Thank you for your time and consideration,
Jenius Halphas,
Vice Principal of Ranoa University of Magic*

A special student... in other words, on scholarship? I knew that a Magicians' Guild existed in this world, but had no idea what they did. I did know, however, of a Thieves' Guild that sold items on the black market and traded in slaves. Based on that, I assumed the Magicians' Guild was probably involved with the buying and selling of books on magic and magical research.

But why were they only sending me this letter now? I suppose that even if I did feel like I was at an impasse when it came to my magic, I was more than powerful enough to make it as an adventurer, and had even beaten a Red Wyrms straggler essentially on my own. It might have been weakened, but that didn't change the fact that I beat it. And winners were the ones who wrote history, after all.

Still, I didn't see the need to sit through seminars to get me excited about learning. Someone from God-knows-where was inviting me to go God-knows-where for only God-knows-why. This had to be some kind of scam, right? Like that African gold dust routine.

That said, this letter was proof that my efforts these past two years were being recognized. The University of Magic was Roxy's alma mater, and I was genuinely honored they'd seen fit to reach out to me—which was why I had to verify the letter's authenticity.

"Miss Elinalise, I'm going to step out to the Adventurers' Guild for a bit."

"Oh? Weren't you taking the day off?" She was grooming her luxurious mane, having taken the day off manhunting for once.

"There's something I want to look into."

"Wait a moment. I'll go with you." Elinalise set the brush down and stood up. Her hair wasn't yet perfectly set, but enough that she seemed to deem it permissible.

"I'm not going out to take on quests. I'll be coming right back."

"A long time ago, Paul said the same thing before he went off to the Adventurers' Guild to pick up girls."

"He did, huh? Well, that does sound like him," I acknowledged. "What does that have to do with me?"

"If you're going fishing to hook up, we'll have better odds with the two of us. Let's aim for other male-female pairs."

What was this slut talking about now? “Please stop with the male-female pairs thing... What if they’re lovers? That’s not going to go down well.”

“It’s fine. I can tell if they’re lovers just by looking,” she said.

“I’m not going to pick up girls, so you don’t have to come with me.”

Sex was the only thing she thought about at any given time, though she’d change tracks abruptly when we accepted a request, transforming into a serious female adventurer in the blink of an eye. That dichotomy was probably one of the things that made men fall for her.

“Don’t say that,” Elinalise whined. “Think about it from my perspective! I have to go manhunting because you won’t play with me.”

“I’d be happy to play with you—if you could get my little boy to stand up.”

“I’d love to try, but I can’t have sex with Paul’s son. Also, I promised Roxy I wouldn’t. I don’t want her to hate me.”

What a completely incoherent explanation. Was this woman really just making it all up as she went? Still, I could understand her not wanting Roxy to hate her, and the fact that she felt that way made me unable to hate her, either. How impressive of my God, to even make someone like Elinalise live in fear of her displeasure.

“That’s not my fault,” I said.

“Certainly true. But what’s wrong with picking up girls? All healthy young boys do it.”

“I’m not a healthy boy.”

“My, my, that was well played.”

And so, I somehow wound up taking Elinalise with me as I set off to the Adventurers’ Guild. Not to pick up girls though, okay?

It was already past noon, and there weren’t many adventurers around. Soldat and the rest of Stepped Leader weren’t around, either.

Despite being bears, Luster Grizzlies didn't hibernate in winter, and elimination requests were aplenty.

After scanning the room, I spotted the A-ranked party Cave A Mond. They were a party of magicians with only four members: one magic warrior and three magicians. All of them could use at least intermediate-tier magic or better and their leader was an advanced fire-magic user.

"Yo, Quagmire, on a date today?"

"Yes, my beautiful girlfriend kept nagging me to go out and pick up some girls."

"Huh?"

The one who addressed me was their leader, Conrad. He was a seasoned adventurer of forty, somber and mustachioed. He'd dropped out of the hunt for the Red Wyrms straggler, but we had an amicable relationship.

"What's up? Have you finally decided to join our party?" He'd extended the invitation several times now. According to him, offensive magic users who could also use Intermediate-tier healing magic were a rare commodity.

"Hmph. I'm a lone wolf."

"What are you trying to act all cool for? You've already got a party, don't ya? With that woman over there."

I glanced back to see Elinalise picking up some young adventurer. Or seducing, more like. I could see the red flush on the man's face. A beastfolk would have said they could smell his arousal. Judging by the look of him, he hadn't much experience, and Elinalise had him more confused than turned on.

Well, not that it mattered.

"More importantly, Mister Conrad, I have something I'd like to ask you about."

"What is it? If it's something weird, you owe me a fee. You got quite the payday out of beating that straggler, right? Gah, I should've gone too. If I'd only known you'd defeat the thing all by yourself..."

"I'll treat you to something next time," I promised. "Now, as for what I wanted to ask... You're from the Ranoa University of Magic,

right?”

“Yeah. Dropped out in my fifth year, though.”

I didn’t care whether he was a dropout or not. “I received this letter,” I said, and showed it to him.

“Ahh, a special student. Yeah, they have those.”

“Can you give me more details?”

“At the University, they have guys like you who can use weird magic, and adventurers who’ve made a name for themselves but aren’t associated with the Magicians’ Guild. They’ve got nobles and royalty from other countries too, but they mainly solicit those with incredible magical power. They tell ’em they don’t have to attend classes as long as the University can list them as a student.”

“How come?” I asked.

“Simple. If those guys make a name for themselves in the future, it’s free advertising for the University, right?”

Or so he said. Scholarship students, huh? We’d had those at schools in my former life, though this seemed a little different. Exactly how did this special student status work? At any rate, if they’d invited me based on the information that I could use magic without incantations, then it definitely wasn’t a scam.

“Well, what does the Magicians’ Guild do?”

“They sell scrolls, support the creation of magical implements and stuff. I don’t really know all the details. I mean, I’m a member, but only F-ranked.”

“Ah, that’s right. Don’t they say you’ll receive D-ranked membership if you graduate?”

“Sure, *if* you graduate,” he said.

The Magicians’ Guild generally supported all activities that related to magic. You qualified for membership if you could at least use beginner magic. The lowest tier of membership was F-rank, and your influence within the guild increased with your rank, allowing you to seek various forms of aid.

Most magic schools made you an E-ranked member of the guild once you graduated. The Magic University was a bit special in that it gave you a *D*-ranked membership, largely because the University was

the heart of the guild itself. Not to mention the possibility of graduating with a C-ranked membership if your research was fruitful.

“What does being C-ranked allow you to do?” I asked.

“Beats me. Fastest way to find out would be to ask the guild yourself, but they don’t have a branch in this town.”

It seemed you weren’t really eligible for the Magicians’ Guild’s aid if you were only F-ranked. The guidelines for advancing through the ranks weren’t as clear as the Adventurers’ Guild’s were, either, meaning that it was mostly rich people or skilled brown-nosers who quickly got promoted.

“Oh, yeah—Quagmire, you didn’t go to school, did ya?”

“I had a private tutor.”

“You must come from quite the wealthy household, then.”

“As you can tell from my last name, I’m from one of Asura’s nobler branch families.”

“Sorry, but what was your last name again?”

“Greyrat. Rudeus Greyrat.”

The name Rudeus the Quagmire was fairly well-known, but my surname wasn’t. I didn’t know Conrad’s family name, either. He’d said it when he first introduced himself, but I didn’t remember.

“Greyrat—the liege lords of Asura, huh. That’s amazin’. What are you doing as a solo adventurer out here then?”

“Well...” I started to say, and then an image of Eris popped up in the back of my mind. Her face, the warmth of that night, the sense of loss I felt the next morning, and the unpleasant memories with Sara—it had been in the wake of Eris’s departure that my little boy stopped being able to stand up.

By the time I realized what was happening, tears were rolling down my cheeks. “H-huh...?”

“Ah... sorry, shouldn’t have asked, everyone has their reasons.”

I’d made him uncomfortable. I meant to forget Eris, but each time something like this happened, I’d be hit by the memories. It was about time I moved on, surely. Eris was quick to get over things. She’d probably forgotten about me long ago. There was no point clinging to those feelings. It’d been so easy for me to cut off my feelings for Sara, so

why couldn't I forget Eris?

No, just stop thinking about it, I told myself.

"Well, anyway, since they went out of their way to welcome you, isn't it worth going and seeing what they've got to offer?"

When Conrad said that, I remembered being Eris's tutor. Back then, I'd thought I was doing it to save up for attending the University of Magic alongside Sylphie. Boy, that was a trip down memory lane. Sylphie was getting bullied at the time, and I'd been teaching her magic, although at the same time, I felt like my own magical abilities had hit a wall. Back then, all I thought about was honing my skills in pursuit of that goal, and I was still well aware of the importance of improving my abilities. I planned to keep doing so from here on out. Becoming a member of the Magicians' Guild surely had its benefits. But I still had my family to think about, and I knew from these past couple of years that my current abilities were more than enough for my daily purposes. Unlike a few years ago, I didn't feel the same urgency to learn anything new. Granted, there was the possibility I'd suddenly run into someone like Orsted again...though he was hardly an opponent you could defeat with just a bit of training. He'd disposed of Ruijerd, who'd lived for several hundred years, with just one hand. If we did cross paths again, I'd be better off avoiding fighting him at all.

"Rather than tagging along behind someone like Paul, why don't you try doing something for your own sake? Like going to school? You're old enough to be independent, right?" Elinalise was suddenly standing beside me.

"I'll have time for that after I go and see my family," I said.

"Zenith is just fine. You'll see them again while they're still alive, that's enough."

"But our family was separated...we should at least reunite first."

"Paul and the others are going to return to Asura, anyway. You can go see them there," she reasoned.

"But they might continue living in Millishion instead, you know?"

"It's not the best place for a man with two wives to live."

Monogamy was one of the teachings of the Millis faith, and the majority of the Holy Country of Millis's citizens were followers of the faith. She had a point.

“Just be honest—you don’t want to meet with my father, do you?”
I accused her.

“No, I don’t,” she said, shrugging her shoulders indifferently. Did she really hate Paul that much? She hadn’t wanted to see him in the first place, but she also had no intention of abandoning her job to deliver me there. Sometimes I really had no idea what she was thinking.

“By the way, Quagmire...” said Conrad.

“Yes, what is it?”

“Isn’t it about time you introduced me to the pretty lady?” He looked at her with a thirsty gaze.

Why was this woman so popular? Well, at any rate, I’d made a decision about the University. It was an attractive proposal, but I was going to pass on enrolling for now.

As I dreamed that same night, I found myself in a pure white room. It was him—*that guy* again. The mosaic one, from two years ago.

“Yeah, it’s been a while.”

Yeah, I knew it. Man-God.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

Nothing. Don’t worry about it.

“I’m not. I’m used to you saying strange things, after all.”

Is that so? Well, it’s been a while since I had this dream, but I don’t feel as disgusted as usual.

“You must’ve gotten used to it, right?”

Dunno. More importantly, I called to you over and over while I was searching for Zenith, you know? Couldn’t you have come to me even once?

“There was a lot happening on my end.”

That so? Well, we found her in the end, anyway. Just feels like I lost a whole two years over it.

“I’m glad that you found your mother, though.”

Yeah. I never dreamed Roxy would be looking for her.

“She is a hard worker, after all.”

She really is. I'm proud of my master. It seems she's headed for the Begaritt Continent, too. I can't wait to see her.

“Are you sure? You really want the master you're so proud of to see how pathetic you look right now?”

Pathetic? Me? Right now?

“Don't you agree? After Eris ran off, you went through all that trouble to make it with that girl Sara, and then your nether regions wouldn't play ball. Your magic may have improved a bit, but it's hit a dead end these past few years. Even your swordsmanship hasn't gotten much better, despite practicing every day. The only thing that's really gotten stronger is your body, but is that something you want to brag about? ‘See what an amazing pupil I've become?’”

Grrr, you're really laying into me, aren't you? Okay, so what are you trying to say?

“Isn't it important for you to hone your abilities right now? Go to the University of Magic, and you'll learn so much that your time as an adventurer will pale in comparison.”

What the hell? You running a cram school or something? ...wait. Is this what I think it is? Your usual advice?

“Yeah, something like that.”

As always, you beat around the bush and make everything sound fishy.

“Really? But you should listen to what I'm telling you this time. If you go to the Begaritt Continent, you will definitely regret it.”

Regret it? Why?

“I can't tell you.”

Yeah, sure. Well, it's not like this is the first time you've concealed something from me. You should know your reasoning sounds weak. I want to take things slow too, but only after my family has all been found and gathered in one place.

“That's why my actual advice is what I'm about to say.”

That's what I've been waiting for. Let's hear it.

“Rudeus, go forth and enroll at the Ranoa University of Magic.

There, you must investigate the Displacement Incident in the Fittoa Region. If you do this, you will be able to regain your abilities and confidence as a man.”

Huh? Seriously? Man-God, are you saying that my erectile dysfunction can be cured at the University?! That’s what you mean, right? Right... Right...

My words left only an echo as my consciousness faded.

I opened my eyes to find Elinalise’s face right beside mine. Dumbfounded, I stared at her in amazement as I recalled the events of the previous night. In a rare turn of events, her manhunting had ended in failure. When day turned to night, she said, “It’s too cold, I can’t sleep,” and slipped into bed with me.

It was true that winter nights in the north were bitterly cold. This was a world with no air conditioners or gas heaters. Good inns had fireplaces in every room or a single magical one that heated the entire building, but this one was cheap. It provided a super thick comforter, but that was it. I used magic to heat the room, so it didn’t really bother me, but Elinalise seemed rather cold. I decided this was one of the demands of the job and welcomed her in.

So here I was, in bed with this beautiful older woman who had no concept of chastity, and yet my little seal remained firmly supine. I tried fiddling with her body while she was asleep to test myself, but got no reaction. This was exactly what I’d dreamed of in my previous life—just having my way with a woman’s body. And I was doing it. I was insanely turned on, but there was no ripple down my spine, no reaction from below.

“Hmmm...”

When I lifted my hands from her, she wrapped herself around me like an octopus. Her body, soft despite its lack of padding, pressed against me. The way she coiled herself around me was so suggestive, and yet, I felt no reaction. Eventually, her breathing grew calm and quiet once more, and my arousal began to fade, leaving an emptiness, a loneliness, and a sense of inferiority.

Tears welled up in my eyes. "So... this will finally go away..."

That was how I quietly came to my decision to attend the University.

Three months later, when the snow began to melt, I announced my departure to Soldat and his group. Although I considered myself a solo adventurer, I'd travelled often with the members of Stepped Leader, and thought farewells were in order. I gathered the members of the party in front of the inn and explained that I was going off to Ranoa. "Everyone... thank you for everything you've done for me up until now."

They all looked a bit desolate as they replied, "Good luck," and "Be well." I looked at last toward Soldat, who wasn't meeting my eyes, and bowed my head.

"Soldat. Thank you for everything."

"What?"

"I mean, you took really good care of me and I did nothing for you in return..."

Soldat Heckler. Regardless of what he said, he'd looked out for me these last few years. He'd even tried a bunch of different things to help me cure my ED. If it hadn't been for Zenith, I probably would've joined his party.

"I wasn't lookin' out for you in particular, so you have nothin' to return. In fact, you helped me make some cash. Your magic skills are top-notch. The one who should be sayin' thanks is me." He gave a vulgar chuckle, but his expression turned awkward and he averted his eyes.

What a tsundere. He was bad with words, but I was pretty sure he'd taken a liking to me. If he really didn't like me, he wouldn't have panicked when I saw him and Elinalise together, nor would he be looking so awkward right now. "But, well, good for you. You're finally gonna get that fixed, right?"

"Nothing's certain yet."

“Ah, okay. Well, I’m sure our group will eventually have a reason to head out that way. When that happens, let’s go out for drinks and women again,” Soldat said with a grin, smacking on the back.

Feeling grateful for that parting nudge, I set out for the Ranoa Kingdom.

Chapter 2: Entrance Exam

RANOA KINGDOM was the largest country in the Central

Continent's northern region, wielding the same kind of influence and power as the Shirone Kingdom in the south. However, it also had an alliance with Basherant and Neris, as well as intimate ties to the Magicians' Guild. The three countries of Ranoa, Basherant, and Neris were called the Three Magic Nations.

Why "magic," you ask? Was it because the Magicians' Guild's HQ was located there? That was part of it, but the real reason was that these three countries poured a tremendous amount of resources into magical research, gathering exceptional people from around the world.

Created for that purpose, and acting as leader of the alliance, was a grand city built on the edge of Ranoa Kingdom: the Magic City of Sharia. The Ranoa University of Magic, the Magicians' Guild HQ, and Neris Magical Implements Workshop were all shoved into that one flourishing city that was basically the center of the Magic Nations.

If you viewed the city from above, you'd find the Magicians' Guild at its center, built with the latest style of magic-resistant brick. In the east, the Student District was centered around the University of Magic, while in the west, the Magical Implements Workshop was the heart of the Workshop District. Nestled in the middle of the Commerce District was the Trader's Guild, and in the south was the Lodging District, which welcomed those entering the city, including adventurers. Looking at the map, I realized that its layout was based off Millishion's. Not that there was anything useful about that discovery.

Elinalise and I booked an inn in the Lodging District. This time, we picked an A-ranked one equipped with a fireplace. Elinalise would come diving into my bed whenever it got cold, and the temptation of touching her defenseless form just made me feel depressed. Ergo, a fireplace was a necessary amenity. Elinalise certainly wasn't complaining.

As I discovered on our journey here, she had a reason for needing to sleep with men. While we were on the road, we took a slight wrong

turn and didn't reach the next city for over a week. During that time, her health deteriorated rapidly. Tremors ran through her body without explanation, her face turned pale, but there was something dangerous in her eyes as she looked at me.

There was nothing I could do for her in my current condition, so I frantically cast detoxification magic on her and fondled her breasts. When I asked for more details, she revealed to me that she was afflicted by a curse: if she didn't periodically sleep with men, she would die. Hearing that, I felt some sympathy for her plight, but it seemed Elinalise didn't feel bitter about it at all. "I love sex, so even if I wasn't cursed, I'd be doing much the same," she'd said. Unlike me, she was managing her unique illness pretty well.

"Well then, I'm going to go see this Mister Jenius person now. What will you do, Miss Elinalise?"

"I'll come too."

"...Why?" I figured she'd go somewhere like the Adventurers' Guild to sniff out a man.

"Since we came all the way here, I'm going to try enrolling in this Magic University as well."

"Why? Are you interested in magic?"

"Nope, but I'm interested in young men."

"Ah, so that's it."

In other words, her usual motivation. Still, though they called it a university, there were a lot of children around. I had no idea what Ranoa's laws were like—her activities wouldn't be considered abducting a minor, right? Ah, well. I wouldn't be the one getting arrested, and it wasn't like I could do anything to stop her.

"You'll probably have to pay full tuition and fees."

"Not a problem. This may come as a surprise to you, but I have quite a bit of money, you know," she said, giving her coin purse a slap. It contained not just currency from this region but more than five Asura Gold Coins as well. I also knew she had a number of magic crystals in her backpack—beautiful crystals, orb-shaped, large enough to fit in the palm of my hand. Each would net about ten Asura Gold coins if sold.

I wondered where she'd gotten her hands on such things, but she was an adventurer who usually went delving in labyrinths. Maybe she'd

had them for a while, carrying them around instead of money. Magic crystals could be sold for cash without worrying about currency exchange rates.

Enrolment would cost her, but she wasn't short on cash. Her motives might be impure, but who was I to judge?

"Alright. Then let's get going."

The two of us headed toward the University of Magic.

The Ranoa University of Magic occupied a vast tract of land, the campus filled with massive brick buildings, including one in the center that looked almost like a castle. To the untrained eye, it might look like a fortress. It reminded me of Tsukuba University in Ibaraki Prefecture, though I'd only ever seen pictures.

I passed my letter to the pair standing guard at the front gate. "Excuse me, this is the letter I received."

The guard took a look at it, grunted, and nodded. "Do you know the Teachers' Building?"

"I don't."

"Go straight from here, and turn right at the statue of the first principal. It's the building with the blue roof. Hand this to the receptionist there and they'll let the vice principal know you're here."

"Thank you."

Before Elinalise could give the man a suggestive look, I dragged her onward by the ear. Her long ears provided lots of purchase.

It was a straight path all the way to the statue of the first principal. The road was lined with bare-branched trees. I wondered if cherry blossoms would be blooming once spring came—actually, I had no idea if this world even had cherry blossoms. Rising from behind the trees was a brick wall about three meters high. I almost expected archers to spring out from behind it, saying, "You fell for our trap!"

"These are all made from magic-resistant bricks."

"Hm." At Elinalise's utterance, I turned my attention to the wall.

Magic-resistant bricks, as their name implied, were bricks that repelled mana. Apparently, they could even withstand a large-scale magical attack.

From what I heard, the Magicians' Guild had a monopoly on the sale and production of magic-resistant bricks. They were so expensive that the only place they were used in the Asura Kingdom was the capital. I hadn't seen any in the Holy Country of Millis or the King Dragon Realm, but you saw them a lot in the Magic Nations. They were even used in the walls of the Adventurers' Guilds here. The process of their creation was a well-guarded secret, but maybe the raw materials themselves weren't that costly.

We came into a somewhat large plaza, in the center of which was a statue of a girl wearing a robe. There was a plate attached to it that read *First Principal, Fifty Sixth Generational Leader of the Magicians' Guild, Frau Claudia*. The wall of bricks ended here, and before us loomed a mansion large enough to be a fortress, surrounded by at least six other buildings. I caught a glimpse of roaring flames on the grounds to the side of the building. Considering no one was making a fuss, I assumed it was part of a class.

To the left were several large buildings with red roofs, plenty of windows, and verandas. From the laundry drying on said verandas, I assumed these were the student dorms. To the right was a building with a blue roof, and to my left, another building with a red roof. Since I wasn't a part of the Sylvanian Family, I was going to head to the right.

"I'm getting a bit excited," Elinalise suddenly muttered.

"You are?"

"I mean look at all these huge buildings!"

What was this tart suddenly being all cutesy for? I supposed adventurers didn't encounter such large buildings often. At most, they had the Adventurers' Guild. "What's the biggest building you've been inside before?"

"Millishion's Adventurers' Guild HQ," she said.

"Ahh, come to think of it, that place was pretty big." I'd been to the Millishion Adventurer's Guild before, too. Granted, I'd seen even larger buildings in my previous life so it didn't really impress me.

"You're such a party pooper," she said. "When I saw the Millishion

Adventurers' Guild for the first time, I was so excited that I almost threw my arms around Paul without even thinking... tch. Those are memories I'd rather forget."

As Elinalise mumbled to herself, her expression contorted in disgust. Exactly what had Paul done to get this woman—who'd boasted about being fine with any man—hate him that much? Come to think of it, how long ago had the two of them parted ways? I was fifteen right now, so it had to be more than fifteen years ago...

"This is a bit out of the blue, but how old are you, Miss Elinalise?"

"My, my, that's not a question you should be asking a lady," she chided. "I'm fifty, by the way."

"You liar."

As we talked, we finally reached the building with the blue roof. I handed my letter to the receptionist—an old woman—and we were led to an inexpensively furnished room with a sofa and a table. "Please wait here for a bit," she said, and vanished.

"Phew," I exhaled.

"If you sigh like that, you'll let all your good fortune slip away."

I sat on the sofa and Elinalise nuzzled against me. She always did this when she sat next to a man, but it didn't really bother me. It made her happy to fondle a man's body, and it made me happy to have a beautiful older woman pressed up against me. There was no reason for either of us to object—except for my little man, who refused to respond even in this situation.

Preoccupied with those thoughts, I surveyed our surroundings. If I had to rank this reception area, I'd give it a C. The room was sparse and the couch was hard. Maybe that made it a suitable place to welcome adventurers.

"Sorry to keep you waiting. I'm Vice Principal Jenius."

The vice principal appeared after about twenty minutes, responding quickly, despite our lack of an appointment. He was old and fussy-looking, with a receding hairline. As he was wearing a deep blue-colored robe, I assumed he was a water magic user.

"A pleasure to make your acquaintance, I'm Rudeus Greyrat." I promptly stood, offering a nobleman's greeting and bowing before him. When I glanced at Elinalise, I noticed her doing something similar as

she lowered her head.

“And you are?”

“My name is Elinalise Dragonroad. I’m Rudeus’s party member.”

“Uh-huh...”

He gave her a look that said, *Who the heck are you and what are you doing here?*, but Elinalise seemed entirely unperturbed. Jenius shrugged it off and motioned for us to take our seats. “I never imagined you would make it to us this quickly,” he said.

“I came on someone’s recommendation.”

“Someone’s? Ahh, you must mean Roxy?”

That’s Miss Roxy to you, punk! I screamed inwardly, although I kept quiet.

“That’s not who I meant, although she recommended this school to me as well.”

“Aha... well then, may we go ahead and enroll you at the university?”

“Yeah, sure.” Thrown off by the way Jenius suddenly leaned forward in excitement, I hesitantly nodded.

“Ah, where are my manners? Most magicians who work solo tend to be very prideful, particularly ones as young as yourself.”

“I see.”

“I heard that you downed a Red Wyrms straggler the other day. I never expected someone like you would actually agree to enroll at our university.”

While it differed slightly by country or race, for the most part, people in this world were considered adults when they turned fifteen. Of those who became adventurers before they reached the age of adulthood, most never rose very far in the ranks. The few who did, however, tended to develop oversized egos. I’d met two such people myself. One was a fourteen-year-old B-ranked boy (what was his name again?) who was incredibly self-assertive, and had considered me a rival, for some reason. We were the same age back then, and he probably didn’t like the fact that I was A-ranked. Around the time I started thinking, *huh, haven’t seen him around for a while*, it turned out he’d failed an extermination quest and died.

The other was a fifteen-year-old B-ranked girl. Her name was Sara. I didn't want to think too hard about her, but she *had* been real proud, and we clashed a lot at first.

Jenius probably thought I was like them—someone who had a big head. Unfortunately, the one big head I did have wasn't feeling very energetic lately.

"There's a lot that I'd still like to learn. The university seems like a good place for me to do that. And, of course, I'll be sure to advocate for the school after I graduate," I said, recalling my conversation with Conrad.

Jenius laughed bitterly. "I appreciate that you cut straight to the point."

"That said, I don't know what a special student is, exactly. I was hoping you could explain it for me."

Jenius nodded, then stopped, as if he'd suddenly remembered something, and gave me a strained smile. "Before that, would you be willing to take a small test first?"

"A test?" Like an entrance exam? Crap. I hadn't prepared anything at all. It'd been ten years since Roxy first taught me about magic, too. Uhh, if memory served me correctly, then combination magic was... ah, crap. If I'd known this was going to happen, I would've prepared ahead of time.

"Yes, a test to determine if the rumors we've heard of your abilities are correct. A practical test."

So, not a written test. That was a relief to hear.

I was hoping they didn't want me to defeat another straggler, because frankly, I wasn't up to doing that. I was an absolute coward, after all! When I said as much to Jenius, he just gave a strained laugh and said, "Of course not." His laugh often sounded like that. He must have been through a lot.

Jenius guided me outside, where we headed toward a line of buildings. According to him, our destination was the practice building's

training hall, where magical experiments and tests were conducted.

“You guys sure do have a lot of buildings here. Do you really have that many students?”

Jenius nodded. “Ranoa University differs from your typical magic school because it offers ordinary courses, too. There are courses specifically tailored to noblemen, as well as arithmetic courses for merchants and people going into business, and more. Of course, no matter what course a person is in, they will still be learning magic.”

So they tailored their course offering to people’s social standing and personal interests? It was just as Roxy had said: this school could accommodate anyone. No wonder it was enormous.

“Of course, we don’t have anyone at this school who can teach Emperor-tier magic, but we do boast a host of professors whose magical skills surpass those of the Asura Royal Academy’s staff.”

“Impressive.”

“We also have a military strategy course, but very few students are enrolled in it.”

“Would you happen to offer a medical course that, for instance, teaches students how to handle mental illnesses?”

“A medical course on mental illnesses? No, there’s definitely no such thing. We have an assortment of teachers skilled at healing and detoxification magic, but the field you’re inquiring about isn’t related to magic, is it?”

“True, it’s not.” I guess it was just a university after all, not a university hospital. Could my condition really be cured here? Well, the Man-God had said so, after all. There was no need for me to get impatient.

“Is someone you know sick?” Jenius asked me.

“I wouldn’t go as far as to say they’re sick. More like...they’re cursed or something.”

“I see, so you came here to research how to remove a curse? That’s commendable.”

“My intentions aren’t quite that noble,” I said.

As we chatted, we entered one of the buildings constructed of magic-resistant bricks. Inside was a large, open area almost like a gym,

and on the floor were four magic circles with a radius of about five meters each. Crowded around their edges were some twenty boys and girls all wearing similar robes. They stepped into the circles in groups of two and began launching offensive magic at each other. Weren't they going to get hurt doing that?

"Those are the fourth-year students. I believe this class is mostly of noble ancestry. Our school emphasizes combat experience, so we conduct battle simulations such as these."

One student's fireball engulfed another—only to be extinguished by the circle at their feet as it gave off a faint glow. The student reappeared from beneath the vanishing flames without a single burn on them.

"What's that magic circle?" I asked.

"A Saint-tier healing circle. Even if you get hit by an attack you'll recover at once."

"Whoa, that's amazing."

"It's nested within an Advanced-tier barrier that can withstand a fair bit of magic."

I see. A magic circle. I hadn't paid much attention when I first happened upon them in a magic textbook years ago, but they'd caused me trouble several times during my journey home from the Demon Continent. Maybe I should learn how to use them—that said, if I was ever trapped in a circle like the one I'd encountered in Shirone again, I was probably strong enough to bust out of it now.

We moved toward a circle across from the dueling students. "So what should I do?" I asked.

"I've heard you are a user of voiceless magic, Mister Rudeus. I would like you to show me."

"That's all? If I were really an imposter, I'd be prepared to fake that much, wouldn't I?"

"Hm? Well, that's certainly true...but our school only had one teacher of voiceless magic and he passed last year. Old age." He fretted over what to do for a moment, then, smacked his fist into his palm. "Aha, this is perfect. There's actually someone else who can use voiceless magic in this class! They may not be any match for you, but they're our prized pupil. They're also involved in this year's Student

Council—but, well, that’s not really important.” Jenius ran off to the other magic circle, calling out to the teacher there. “Professor Gueta! Can I borrow Fitz?”

After a few moments, we were approached by a young boy with short white hair and sunglasses. His ears were long too: an elf, maybe? His frame was petite—no, he was just young. About thirteen, maybe? More brains than brawn, for sure. Possibly younger than me, and definitely less built, but he’d be my upperclassman. I should at least pay my respects.

The moment his eyes met mine, I bowed my head and loudly introduced myself. “It’s a pleasure to meet you. My name is Rudeus Greyrat. Provided everything goes smoothly, I’ll be a first-year starting next semester. If you find me lacking in any way, I hope you’ll help guide and encourage me along.”

“Ah... hm? Oh, y-yes!” Fitz tried to say something, but I’d already finished my introduction. After all, the first person to introduce themselves was the victor! His mouth kept opening and closing but finally, he managed, “I’m Fitz. A pleasure.”



His voice was a bit awkward and high; it seemed he hadn't yet hit puberty. Definitely younger than me, but an upperclassman was still an upperclassman. Afraid of leaving a bad impression, so I decided to show some deference. "I realize this is an inconvenience, but thank you for participating in my trial."

"Uh... yeah."

Once we were both within the magic circle, Jenius mumbled something and the circle began to emanate faint light. I tried testing the outer barrier by knocking on it but my hand went right through. "Huh? Vice Principal Jenius, this isn't functioning properly."

"Mister Rudeus, this barrier only repels magic."

"So physical attacks go right through."

Right—the barrier I'd encountered in Shirone had blocked both physical and magical attacks, but it was King-tier. Ah, well. I could look into barriers when I had the time. It might be worth having someone teach me, since I'd come all the way to the university

"Well, then. Since you're an adventurer, you won't mind conducting a mock battle with Fitz, would you? I'd like you to primarily use voiceless magic."

"Sure, that's fine by me." I nodded, facing Fitz.

Although—if I was defeated, would I have to pay tuition instead of getting a full ride? I had a nice nest egg after eliminating that straggler wyrm, but as someone who'd counted every penny for years, now, I wanted to avoid paying if I could.

Time to get serious then.

Empty space yawned between us as Fitz took his stance. He held in his hand a single small wand. That brought back memories: I'd once used an instrument just like that. I readied my staff, the one I'd been using for the past ten years—Aqua Heartia. I used it so much that I was debating giving it a name, like Charlene. Though honestly, giving it a girl's name wouldn't really make it more powerful.

"Now then..."

I'd decided to take this seriously, but it was also my first time fighting another person who could use magic without incantations. I'd worked out strategies for this scenario, but I wasn't actually sure if they

would work.

“Alright, begin!”

In the instant that command was given, my demon eye showed Fitz readying his wand. He probably planned to use the speed of his voiceless magic to launch the first attack. In that case, I’d just have to counter it, using my magic to disrupt his.

“Disturb Magic!”

“Huh? What? Why?!” Fitz stared at his wand in shock when it didn’t work like it was supposed to.

“Good question. What could it be?” With my left hand, I conjured one of my trademark stone cannons. Powerful, flexible, and easily fired in rapid succession; this spell, coupled with Quagmire, was part of my go-to strategy for elimination requests. Besides, if I got careless with fire magic, I could end up burning myself.

I made my cannon the size of a fingertip, put a tight spin on it and launched it at top speed. I initially meant to aim it right at Fitz’s head... but changed my mind.

And fire!

The cannon whistled through the air, skimming the edge of Fitz’s cheek and bursting through the barrier with a beautiful crash. It stopped when it hit the wall of magic-resistant bricks, spraying debris everywhere.

“...!”

A rivulet of blood trickled down Fitz’s cheek as he stood frozen in place. The wound closed almost immediately, thanks to the healing circle. Fitz wiped off the blood with a finger and looked back to where the stone cannon had planted itself in the wall. Then, he fell back onto his bottom with a thud.

It was a good thing I’d aimed to miss. Healing magic wasn’t all-powerful. Saint-tier healing magic could heal simple wounds in an instant, but not bring back the dead, and a direct hit could have killed Fitz.

Fitz’s gaze met mine. He was wearing sunglasses, but somehow, I knew that our eyes had met.

Neither of us said anything to the other. Fitz’s gaze just steadily

grew stronger. I got the feeling, somehow, that I'd really screwed this up. Those gathered around the other magic circle had all turned to look my way, too. Jenius stared, wide-eyed. Elinalise yawned.

"H-how did you do that just now?" There was a tremor in Fitz's voice. Jenius, too, looked curious to know the answer.

"It's called Disturb Magic. You don't know of it?"

Fitz shook his head. Guess not. It must not be that well known, though I found it particularly useful in battle against other mages... Come to think of it, in the two years I'd been adventuring, I'd never seen anyone else use it except for Orsted.

Fitz just stared straight at me. His gaze was so intense, even through the sunglasses, that I quietly averted mine. Jenius had said he was a prodigy, and I'd forced him onto his butt in front of everyone. There was a good chance I'd ruined his reputation.

He was going to have it out for me, wasn't he? He'd probably try to trip me during mealtimes, spill his drinks on me and shower me with derisive laughter. I would be *miserable*. I was sure of it.

I had to avoid that at all costs.

Okay, then!

"Thank you, sir! For purposefully losing so I could look good in front of everyone else!" I beamed radiantly and said loud enough for all the other students to hear as I approached him.

"Huh?"

I offered my hand to help him up. Fitz seemed a bit confused, but he accepted it. His hand was soft. He'd probably never held a sword before.

"I'll be sure to thank you properly later," I whispered into his ear as I helped him up. He nodded quickly, and a shiver ran through his body. Once I enrolled, I'd buy him a cake or something to pay my respects.

As for the test, I'd passed with flying colors. Jenius lavished me with praise. If I could shut down Fitz like that, they were ready to admit me at once.

And so, a month later, I was living in the university dorms. I'd also received more details about special students, who were exempt from paying tuition and attending classes. If they wished, they could mingle with the general admission students and take classes they wanted. As long as they attended homeroom once a month, they were basically free to do as they pleased within the school.

You could lay claim to a study in the research building and bury yourself in work. You could occupy a room in the practice building and spend all your time training. You could head to the library and spend days with your nose in a book. You could sit in the cafeteria and eat to your heart's content. You could even go off-campus and become an adventurer, or head to the pleasure district to cut loose and have fun—though, of course, you would be held liable for any actions you took off-campus. Still, I'd been given an extraordinary amount of freedom, it seemed. The school called us special students, but we were probably closer to research scholars.

Of course, this freedom had its limits—we were forbidden to do anything considered a crime under the laws of Ranoa Kingdom, or anything that was destructive to the school, or disrespectful to the Magicians' Guild. I was handed a thin booklet with the school rules inside, and on skimming it, came to the conclusion that I was fine as long as I didn't do anything too extreme. The rules were basically the same as the code of conduct for the Adventurers' Guild. If anything, this made the Adventurers' Guild seem strict in comparison.

Elinalise also enrolled, by the way, as a general admissions student. She told me that tuition from enrollment to graduation cost a single payment of three Asura gold coins, which might sound pretty cheap, but Asura gold coins were the highest unit of currency in this world. A single coin would let you live comfortably in this area for a while.

If a general admissions student got exceptional grades in their exams, they'd receive some degree exemption from tuition and enrollment fees. If they had no money, they could hold off paying until after they graduated. The university was clearly prepared to make great financial accommodations in order to secure remarkable talent. Not that

any of that concerned me at all.

“Hm.” I was thumbing through the rules again. Specifically, the section on penalties for sexual infractions, which was particularly detailed. “Miss Elinalise, it seems that as long as you don’t force yourself on anyone against their will, you’re given a certain level of freedom to do what you want.”

“This is an incredible school. Did you know? Such acts are completely forbidden at Millishion’s school.”

I hadn’t even mentioned the word ‘sex’, and she’d answered without missing a beat. As someone who lived a life of carnal desire, her mind really did work differently than a normal person’s.

The social norms of my previous life had led me to believe people having sex at school would significantly and negatively impact public morals. However, while the student body was largely comprised of young people, their ages varied greatly, ranging from ten to over a hundred. With people of so many different ages and races represented, notions of what constituted “normal” varied greatly. There were also people like Elinalise, who were cursed, and would run into issues if their personal lives were curtailed by rules. Especially since the desire to reproduce was instinctual.

Basically, this school had lax traditions for a good reason. That meant I was free to work at restoring my manly *raison d’être*. *Aww yeah, let’s do it! Let’s get my little guy up and running!*

Just kidding, of course. I had the Man-God’s word that my condition would be cured someday. There was no need to get impatient.

Chapter 3: First Day of School

THE RANOA UNIVERSITY OF MAGIC. The world's greatest magic

school, occupying a vast plot of land and sponsored by three separate countries as well as the Magicians' Guild. The current principal was one of the higher-ups at the Magicians' Guild, the Wind King-tier magician Georg. The student body was over ten thousand strong, with numerous professors in the university's employ. Despite the name "Magic University," you could actually learn a variety of different things there.

Students were welcomed from all races, including demons, who were still deeply ostracized by the Millis faith, or beastfolk, who tended to be isolationists. They even accepted human royalty who'd been driven from their country due to power conflicts, or noble children who were born cursed. There were no sky folk or sea folk enrolled, but if you had mana and could cast magic, you were free to apply, whatever your checkered history. This policy had invited some opposition, from what I heard, but only the Asura Kingdom could conceivably oppose the united might of the alliance and Magicians' Guild, and it had invested no small amount of money into the Magicians' Guild itself.

Incidentally, a certain sect within the Holy Country of Millis—the Temple Knights, as they were called—had positioned themselves as standing in direct opposition to the university and everything it represented. However, given they were on the other side of the world, it seemed they didn't care enough to start a war over it.

The enrollment period for students was seven years. You could take a year abroad twice, for a maximum of nine years of study. If you became a researcher affiliated with the Magicians' Guild, you could continue using the university's equipment after graduation.

The school had a massive five-story dorm, but staying there was optional. Those who had a house in the city commuted from home. In general, however, most students lived in the dorm. A room was prepared for me, a simple space about twenty-tatami-mats wide, with a bunk bed. There was also a table and chair. Two students typically shared a single room, but special students lived alone. I could request a

roommate if I wanted, but I decided against it. I hadn't come here to make friends.

Apparently, you could also pay to be moved to an exclusive room for noblemen, which was more spacious and secure. Not something I needed, I was sure. I wasn't being targeted by assassins for the moment.

The bathroom was in the hallway. Surprisingly, it was flushable. Granted, it wasn't like you could just pull a lever and *whoosh!* There was a water jug next to it and you had to pour water out of it for a manual flush, which would send the crap all the way down to the sewers. Of course, those like me were encouraged to use water magic to wash it down. On that note, the task of filling the water jug fell to the person on duty, but as a special student, I was exempt.

Uniforms were also provided. Men were given a suit while the women were given what resembled a blazer and skirt. Apparently, the specific uniforms had only been introduced this year.

Honestly, I found the designs quite cute. There had to be gym shorts for exercise wear, right? Or so you'd think, but unfortunately, it was just robes. The school didn't provide those, and didn't specify any restrictions or preferences. Students who didn't already have their own robes probably just bought whatever they wanted. I had the robe I'd been wearing for a while now, so I didn't need to buy another.

"Well, does it look good on me?"

Elinalise, in her new school outfit, was currently modeling for me. The way her hair was shaped in lustrous rolls made the robe she was wearing look more like cosplay, but the uniform actually suited her well. Although that, too, looked like cosplay to me because I knew her true character.

"If you roll up the skirt and make it a little shorter, you might have an easier time catching men. Make sure it's just enough that they can almost see your panties."

Elinalise looked at me like I was a genius. "But isn't that going to be a little cold?" she asked.

"Put on thigh-high tights and you should be fine, right?"

"I see. I should've expected as much from you, Rudeus. You're a genius." Elinalise followed my advice and folded up her skirt like a high school girl. Then she rolled up the waist until you could almost glimpse

her fancy underwear.

Hmm... yeah, sexy panties like that just don't suit a uniform, I decided.

We headed to the opening ceremony, which was apparently a thing at this school. The year's new intake was assembled in the cold courtyard. There was a girl looking bored by herself, while another boy listened intently to the principal's speech. Acquaintances were loosely gathered and some were even chatting idly. No one was lined up in an orderly fashion. If this were a Japanese school, the civic guidance teacher would no doubt be screaming their head off. The principal stood before our motley bunch, atop a podium constructed of magic resistant brick, giving his speech.

"Ladies and gentlemen, many moons have passed since those known as magicians were considered inferior to swordsmen. It is true that the styles of swordplay created by the Sword Gods are supreme. However! Magic is just as peerless! Swordsmanship, after all, is nothing more than a tool with which to kill. Magic is different. Magic has a future! We will retake what we have lost, and combine it with current styles of incantation to bring forth a new—"

I stood quietly beside Elinalise. The principal's sermon felt just as long in this world as it had in my old one, but this one was more tolerable. Perhaps because his speech was overflowing with a passion for magic!

...Nope, that wasn't it. It was because of how hilarious it was watching him frantically try to restrain the wig on his head.

Elinalise was surveying the area, evaluating the men she saw. She looked like she was struggling to decide who to start with first.

"That is all. Ladies and gentlemen, the path of magic extends before you!"

Jenius ended with words that made him sound like some protector of freedom and justice. There was no singing of the school anthem. There wasn't even a school anthem to begin with, despite the fact that the country had its own song.

“And now, a few words for the new students from the Student Council President.”

At the Vice Principal’s words, three people, a girl and two boys, took to the stage. Standing at the forefront was a young girl with beautiful golden hair in long, silky tresses with braids woven in. Her clothes—a brand new school uniform—were the same as mine, but even the way she walked brimmed with grace. Completely unlike the joke of a young lady beside me. Granted, while Elinalise’s actions lacked grace, they had their own charm.

“My, my, isn’t that the kid you made cry not so long ago?” Elinalise mused.

At her words, I looked to the two boys walking behind the girl. One of them had white hair and sunglasses—Fitz. He kept his guard up, surveying their surroundings as they mounted the stage. And for what it was worth, I didn’t think he’d cried when I beat him.

The other boy was someone I didn’t know. He seemed a bit older than me. With his brown hair slicked back, he had a frivolous look about him, a sword hanging from his side. He didn’t look like a magician, and judging by the way he carried himself, he was probably a swordsman. The only other noteworthy thing about him was his good looks.

Incidentally, according to my research, sharply defined features, which I considered handsome, were popular in the countries of the Central Continent. That aside, this guy kind of looked like Paul. On a similar note, I was often told I didn’t look half bad, except for when I smiled. Elinalise was the only one who ever told me I had a stunning, manly smile. Since no one complimented it, the only smiling I did anymore was fake.

As the three of them took to the stage, the young crowd around us erupted in murmurs.

“Isn’t that Princess Ariel...”

“Then that one over there must be Silent Fitz!”

“Aaah, it’s Lord Luke!”

They were famous, judging by the squeals. Luke was probably the Paul-lookalike. He got shrill cheers from the girls and raised his hand to wave back. *Tch, and he’s got a name like some male adult film star.*

“My, my, that’s a nice man.” It seemed Elinalise wasn’t a good judge of character, either.

“Silence! Princess Ariel has something to say!” At (presumably) Luke’s order, the clamor fell into silence. Quite impressive given that he hadn’t used a mic. “Go ahead, Princess Ariel.”

She waited for things to quiet before coming to the front of the stage. “My name is Ariel Anemoi Asura. I am the Second Princess of the Asura Kingdom, and the Student Council President of the University of Magic!”

Her voice rang out amidst the silence. My heart trembled as I heard the sound of her voice. This was probably what people called charisma. It wasn’t just that her voice was loud, and clear—something about it was pleasant to listen to.

“You have all gathered here from around the world. Many of you have ideas unlike ours about what constitutes normalcy. However, here at this University, we maintain a sense of order that differs from your places of origin.”

The rest of her speech was primarily about school rules, and boiled down to the fact that even if the rules here differed from those of your homeland, you still needed to abide by them. But there was something about her words that sunk deep into your soul and remained there. *We need to obey the rules*, I thought, and not because I’d been Japanese in my previous life. I felt compelled to do so because she was the one saying so.

“Now then, I hope you all have an enjoyable time as students.” Ariel wrapped up her speech with that final line and descended from the stage.

It was at that moment that I suddenly caught Fitz’s gaze. I shouldn’t have been able to tell he was staring at me through his sunglasses, but I was certain because of how strong his gaze was.

This is bad. I better hurry up and buy that cake.

Once the ceremony was over, I parted ways with Elinalise and headed for my designated classroom. There was homeroom once a month and I had to participate. From what I’d heard, there were only six special students, myself included. Apparently, they were an

assortment of eccentric, troubled individuals. Jenius, the vice principal, had even said, “Please, *please* be careful not to get into any fights.” Not that he needed to; I had no intention of causing a stir. No matter what anyone said to me, I’d just bow my head and let it roll off my back.

I headed to the tail end of three buildings, to the innermost classroom on the third floor. Midway there, I found a line drawn across the floor with the words, *Beyond This Point is the Special Students’ Classroom*. Almost like they were segregating us, even though the special students were supposed to be allowed to wander the school grounds freely. No, perhaps it was the opposite. Special students tended to be arrogant and cause problems, so this was a measure to keep the general admission students from approaching them.

As I mulled over this, I reached the classroom. There was a plate above the door that read *Special Students’ Room*.

“Pardon the intrusion,” I called out quietly as I pried the door open and crept inside. The classroom was a familiar sight. There was a brand-new chalkboard, something like a lectern and a teacher’s desk. Wooden desks lined the room. The windows were firmly shut, but the room was bright. In contrast to the vastness of the room, there were only four people sitting at the desks.

In the front row, there was a boy who was reading and taking notes. The most striking thing about him was the way his dark brown hair hid his eyes. He glanced briefly in my direction, before losing interest immediately and returning to his book. Further in and closest to the windows sat two girls, both of whom were beastfolk. One was chewing at a stringy piece of meat on the bone. A dog-type. Her eyes regarded me suspiciously. The other, a cat-type, had her legs resting on the desk and both hands folded behind her head as she leaned back, glaring my way.

Seeing them reminded me of the two young girls I’d met back in the Doldia village. What were their names again? They were both good kids. In comparison, these two looked a bit ill-mannered. Reminded me of those fashion-obsessed teen girls from back home.

And then there was the last guy—a man I’d seen somewhere before. He had a long face with round glasses, the kind of guy who might have gotten nicknamed Spock back in the day. He spent a few moments gaping at me, then stood up and screeched with his mouth still wide open.

I immediately unleashed my Eye of Foresight.

“M-maaaaster!!” He sent his desk flying as if it were a mere obstacle in his path. He was like a snowplow in the way he crashed through all the other desks between us. One by one they went flying as he plunged forward. Yes, *plunged*—he was steamrolling toward me!

“Stone cannon!” I’d smack him before he reached me.

“Maaaaster!”

He took my stone cannon right to the face and it hit him with a loud crack, but he didn’t even stagger a bit. That cannon had enough power to knock an adult man out, but it had absolutely no effect on this guy? Impossible. Was this really the power of a Blessed Child?!

He grabbed me by my waist and tried to hoist me to the ceiling.

“Whoa, whoa, hold it in, hold it in! Release the tension from your shoulders, relax, calm down! Knock it off!”

His arms had enough power to send me flying into the ceiling, but fortunately, he just lifted me up.

“Master! Have you forgotten me? It is I, Zanoba!” Zanoba was grinning from ear to ear as he carefully wrapped his arms around me in a hug.

What’s with that introduction? Are you supposed to be the wife of a certain Mr. Isono?

“Yes, I remember. My dear pupil, please release me, this is terrifying.”

Before me stood the Third Prince of the Shirone Kingdom, Zanoba Shirone. It seemed when Zanoba was sent away under the pretense of studying abroad, he’d been sent off to the Ranoa University of Magic.

Under normal circumstances, a Blessed Child who couldn’t control their power would be treated like a Cursed Child. However, the Magicians’ Guild had a department that studied curses and blessings, and Blessed Children made excellent specimens. And so, Zanoba was allowed to enroll at the University as a special student in exchange for allowing himself to be studied. A timely offer, given that he’d recently acquired an interest in magic.

“I’ve been aiming to be just like you, Master. I’ve been diligently practicing my earth magic every day,” my dedicated pupil declared.

“Have you? I’m glad to see Your Majesty is doing so well. Once things have calmed down, let’s make a figurine together.”

“Yes!” He smiled and nodded.

This was nice. It brought back memories of my underclassmen in junior high, who’d latched onto me the same way when I bragged about having built my computer myself.

“Also, while we’re here at school, you’re an upperclassman. What year are you right now?”

“Second year. Ha ha, please don’t refer to me as ‘Your Majesty’ or as an upperclassman. You can just call me Zanoba. You are my master, after all.”

“Zanoba, then.”

“Yes, Master.”

A sudden loud smack interrupted our pleasant conversation. I instinctively looked in its direction. The beast girl who’d had both feet on her desk had slammed one to the floor. The other still remained on the desk, which meant her skirt was spread right open so I could see a certain something. “I don’t like this, mew.”

She said ‘mew’! That was something I associated with the Doldia tribe. And Eris’s... no, let’s not go down that road.

“Hey, Zanoba, what are you and that new kid rattling on and on and on about?”

“Mistress Linia, this is the person I spoke about before, my master.”

“That’s not what I’m asking about, mew!” The cat-eared girl irritably slammed the heel of her other foot against the table. “Hey, Zanoba, don’t mess around, okay! You know what I’m talkin’ about, right, mew? You know, don’tcha, huh?!”

His face went stiff.

What was going on? Was he actually being bullied? Zanoba was supposed to be pretty strong, but this could be a question of social hierarchy. Brute strength didn’t necessarily put you at the top.

“If ya do, then bring him over here.” She made a beckoning motion in my direction.

“I’m sorry, Master.”

“No, it’s fine.” I approached the cat-eared girl as I was told.

A cat-eared girl and a dog-eared girl. Their piercing gazes would have made my legs tremble in the past, but they didn’t feel scary at all now. Their glares needed a little bit more... well you know, right? They needed some murderous intent in there, right? That was how truly scary people—like Ruijerd—glared.

“Greetings. A pleasure to meet you, I’m Rudeus Greyrat. I’ll be in your care starting today. I’ll be careful not to butt into anything. I hope we’ll get along well.” I bent in a swooping, Japanese-style bow. Where people like these were concerned, it was best to behave modestly and to do my utmost not to get involved.

Linia purred out a laugh. “Straightforward, eh? Not bad at all, mew. I’m Linia Dedoldia, a fifth year, mew. Though you might not know it just by looking at me, I’m actually the daughter of Gyes, the Warrior Chief of the Great Forest’s Doldia Village. At some point I’ll inherit the position of Village Chief, so you’d best start servin’ me now, mew!”

So she was really of the Doldia Tribe. And Gyes’s daughter, to boot. Come to think of it, they did say his oldest daughter had been sent off to another country to study. So this was it? Man, that sure brought back memories.

I gushed: “Oh, truly? Mister Gyes took good care of me when I visited the Doldia Village before! Ah, I’m so touched! To think I’d be able to meet the daughter of the man who looked after me at a place like this! Oh, that means you must be Mister Gustav’s granddaughter as well, right? Mister Gustav was good to me, too. He even let me stay at his house during the rainy season!”

“O-oh really? That so? So you’re one of Grandpa’s acquaintances...”

In contrast to her earlier spiel, spitting out word after word like a machine gun, Linia was left staring at me dumbfounded. Not that it really mattered, but the force with which she’d kicked the table made a certain article of clothing super visible. Aqua blue, huh?

Beside her the girl who was gnawing away at the meat bone twitched her nose and pulled a face. “It stinks.”

That was rude. She was referring to me, right? Still, I didn’t let my face betray my emotions, but gracefully turned to the dog girl and

bowed. “Pardon me. Might I ask your name as well?”

“Pursena. I’m basically the same as Linia.”

“Miss Pursena, what a lovely name! A pleasure to meet you!”

She pinched her nose and turned her face away. “Fuck.”

That last word was meant as an insult, I assumed—though when girls like her talked that way, it actually turned older men on.

Regardless, this had been a successful preemptive attack. At least, I wanted to believe my efforts had been good enough to avoid getting caught up in something outrageous later on.



Zanoba had a conflicted look on his face as he watched me interact with the two of them. Once we stepped away, he spoke in a hushed voice. “Master, why are you acting so submissive toward them?”

“My dear pupil, it is important to avoid unnecessary conflicts.”

“You really think so...? Well, since you’re the one saying that, I’ll keep my mouth shut.” He looked vexed even as he nodded his head.

I had no idea what he’d gone through, but if it looked like he was being bullied in the future, I’d be sure to shield him from it. Bullying was a no-no. An *absolute* no-no.

As I was preoccupied with that resolution, someone called out from behind me. “Hey.”

“Yes, what is it?”

I looked back and the boy from the front of the row was standing there. “You. You said your name was Rudeus, right?”

“Yes, my name is Rudeus Greyrat. A pleasure to make your acquaintance.”

He looked taken aback when I bowed my head. “Cliff Grimor. I’m a genius magician.”

A genius magician, eh? Incredible. But was he seriously going to call *himself* a genius? Didn’t he feel embarrassed about doing that at all?

“I’m a second year, but I’ve already acquired Advanced-tier ranking in all the offensive magics. I’m also advanced in healing, detoxification and divine magic, too. I’m still a beginner at barriers, but I’ll soon be Intermediate-tier. There aren’t any decent teachers at this school.”

“That’s amazing,” I praised him sincerely. It made sense now why he called himself a genius. What did it take to become an advanced user of all seven types of magic in only two years? I could still only use intermediate healing magic and basic detoxification magic.

So this was the special student class. I’d known there would always be someone better than me out there, but this just drove it home. Probably the only reason my own self-esteem didn’t take a nose dive was because I was Saint-tier with water magic.

“It took me two years just to become Advanced-tier in four types of offensive magic. You really are incredible.”

“Tch, don’t get carried away.”

I just honestly meant to praise him, but he clicked his tongue and turned grumpy. He glared at me with such force he might as well have grabbed me by the collar of my shirt. Although I was a little bit taller than him, so he had to look up at me slightly. “You can wield a sword as well as use magic, can’t you?”

“Yes, well, I’m not very good at it though.” I was technically Intermediate-tier in the Sword God Style. I basically remembered nothing of Water God Style. Part of my bodybuilding regime included swinging a wooden sword, but that wasn’t swordsmanship that was useable in combat.

To be honest, no matter how much time passed, I still couldn’t master what came as easily as breathing to other swordfighters such as Eris and Ruijerd. So I’d semi-given up on the path of the sword. I never even used it once while living as an adventurer. Even so...

“Who told you that? That I could wield a sword.”

“...Miss Eris.”

That shook me. Had he met Eris within the last two years? No way...she wasn’t here at the University?!

“She’s at this school, too?”

“What? Of course she isn’t,” he retorted curtly.

“Um, so... where did you meet her then?”

He just glared at me without answering. Was that a bad question? Ah, don’t tell me he was one of the people she’d punched a long time ago? *I’m sorry, I really am, I apologize on her behalf*, I thought inwardly.

“Uhh... did she say anything else about me?”

He glowered with such force it could have had its own sound effect. After glaring me up and down, he finally said, “Hmph. She said you were small.”

“R-really? She said I’m small?” *Like down there?*

I felt like I was going to cry. So it really was the sex that drove her away from me. If only I’d been bigger, then... Come to think of it, I’d gotten a similar vibe from the way Sara looked at me, too. Her face had said, “Oh wow, you’re smaller than I thought you’d be.”

No, she was mistaken! It only looked small because it wasn’t

reacting! Once it was energized and standing at attention, it had the ferocity of a lion!

“W-well, it’s been two years since we parted ways, and I’ve grown since then,” I stammered.

“What? You and Miss Eris parted ways?”

“Hm?” I got the feeling that we weren’t quite on the same page. A sense of unease arose in me. But before I could confirm that unease...

“Hm, well, whatever. You don’t suit Miss Eris regardless!”

Those words were like daggers to the heart. Cliff huffed air out of his nose and returned to his seat. I’d have to keep an eye on this one.

The teacher arrived soon after, I introduced myself, and after a short conversation, homeroom was over. Though we were missing one person.

“Huh? I heard there was one more special student?”

When I tried asking Zanoba, he just shook his head. “Master Silent is exempt from the monthly homeroom.”

“And why’s that?”

“Good question, but I haven’t an answer for it.”

The last person was apparently someone named Silent. *Don’t tell me they’re a person who can’t use shadow magic?!*

“I guess they must be pretty incredible, huh?”

“They’re well-known. They influence the Academy at every opportunity, or so I hear. They’ve increased the items on the school menu, created magical implements... these uniforms were also one of Master Silent’s suggestions. Rumor has it they were recommended by one of the Seven Great Powers, so they’re getting special treatment.”

The image that popped up in my head was that of a mad scientist with a white coat and bottlecap glasses, carrying flasks of green goop in their hands. Someone who was intelligent and delivered successful results, but was otherwise a sad excuse for a human being.

“They usually shut themselves in their private research room, but they do emerge if they have reason to, so I’m sure you’ll eventually meet them,” Zanoba said. He also mentioned that Silent was a third-year student. If I saw them, I’d be sure to show them the proper respect.

And just like that, I was absorbed into the ranks of the special students.

Once homeroom was over, Zanoba and the others went off to their classes. It was only natural for someone as serious as Cliff to attend classes in earnest, but Linia and Pursena, who seemed more the type to play hooky, were doing so as well. According to Zanoba, the lunch break was about two hours from now. He beamed as he invited me to eat with him and I was happy to oblige.

Eventually, I'd take classes myself. I hadn't come to this school just to study, but I hadn't come here just to bum around, either. I decided to check out the school's facilities in the meantime.

First up was the school infirmary. The one at this school was spacious, with eight beds and two healers, which probably meant there were a lot of magical accidents where people got injured. At that very moment, a man twice my height was being carried in on a stretcher. He was clutching his arm, and one of his legs was bent at an odd angle. One of the healers took hold of an injured area and began a hastened chant of Intermediate-tier healing magic, and the anguish on the man's face quickly faded. I didn't want to get in the way, so I left, spotting the plaque at the entrance which said *Medical Office One* on my way out.

The next place I headed to was the gym's storehouse, a room adjacent to the practice area where I'd taken my exam the other day. The entrance was locked, of course. I had some options: go to the teacher's buildings to get the key, or ask the gym teacher if I could borrow theirs. Then there was the option to pop it open with voiceless casting. That was what I chose, using my earth magic to remove the lock so I could enter.

The inside smelled slightly moldy and dusty. The shelves were lined with leather breastplates and masks that looked like kendo masks, and in the corner was what looked like an umbrella bin stuffed with magic staves. There was an iron scarecrow and some unidentifiable white powder sitting in a jar.

Apparently, classes here didn't involve high jumps or floor gymnastics, so there were no mats. In fact, the name of the room wasn't even *Gym Storehouse*, it was *Practice Equipment*.

I thought about heading to the roof next, but this was a region that got a lot of snowfall, so many of the school buildings had sloping roofs. They did have one rear rooftop room, but I decided to forego that for the moment and head for the library next.

The library at this school was set off from the other buildings, so I had to leave the main campus to get there. After about ten minutes of walking, I made it to the two-story building, and was stopped at the entrance by the gatekeeper.

"Halt!"

"Eh?"

"I've not seen you before. Are you new here? Why aren't you in class?"

"Uh, yes, I'm a new student. A special student with an exemption from classes."

"Show me your student ID."

My movements were stiff as I passed him the student ID I'd received just the other day.

The gatekeeper stared hard at my face as he confirmed my identity and said, "Okay."

He carefully patted me down, and then gave me an overview of what to be careful of when using the library.

Usage of magic was forbidden in the library.

In general, taking books out of the library was strictly prohibited, but there was a certain section you could borrow from.

For the latter, you needed the permission of the librarian and were required to have your name recorded.

And, of course, you'd be penalized for any books you destroyed or defiled.

Same rules as your average library, but really tearing up a book could result in a fine and possible expulsion, even though most of the

books in the library were just copies. Still appropriate, I supposed, given how precious books were in this world.

“It’s quite strict here, isn’t it?” I said.

“Some lowlife secretly switched out some of the books before. And sold the originals on the market, if you can believe it.”

“I see.”

I bowed to the gatekeeper and headed inside, where the subtle scent of books awaited. It was a unique blend of aromas: the smell of mold, of ink, and of paper. A bathroom sat at the entrance, convenient for those who felt the need hit them the moment they stepped into the library. I offered a light greeting to the librarian before heading further in. There were desks and tables lined up by the entrance, and further in were rows of tall bookcases.

“Whoa.” Astonished, I unintentionally let out a gasp. I’d read a lot since coming to this world, but this was the first time I’d ever seen such a vast number of books in one place. Stairs led through an opening in the ceiling to the second floor, which was, as expected, similarly occupied by bookcases. The desks and chairs scattered around suggested quite a few people made it their habit to study here.

I remembered the Man-God’s advice:

“Rudeus, go forth and enroll at the Ranoa University of Magic. There, you must investigate the Displacement Incident in the Fittoa Region. If you do this, you will be able to regain your abilities and confidence as a man.”

Phew—I’d almost completely forgotten about that first bit. But this was perfect. With the sheer volume of books here, I was bound to find something about teleportation. However—where should I even begin?

“Maybe I should ask the librarian...?”

No. There was no rush. Not even the Asura Kingdom had figured out what had caused the Displacement Incident yet. If I could have figured it out that quickly, the Man-God wouldn’t have told me to enroll in the university. He’d have told me to sneak in and investigate, instead. In fact, he’d only told me to look into the incident, not to discover its cause. Maybe something was supposed to happen while I was searching.

For the moment, I settled on figuring out the shelving system. The majority of the books were written in the human tongue, but among

them were those written in Demon God Tongue and Beast God Tongue. There was also a book in Fighting God Tongue. The alphabets I weren't familiar with must've been the Sky God Tongue or perhaps Sea God Tongue. I wished they would translate those tomes into languages I could read.

"Ah!"

There was a sudden small cry from behind me. I turned around and saw a young boy with white hair and sunglasses, carrying a number of tomes and scrolls and looking my way.

It's Fitz, I realized. I hurriedly straightened up, pressed my feet together and bowed. "I apologize for the other day. It was my shallow actions that caused you to lose face. I planned to bring you a box of sweets, but unfortunately, as a new student, I've been busy with so many things..."

"Guh?! N-no, it's fine, please don't bow."

There was a guy in my previous life whom I really respected, named Masa. A working man who could ride out whatever life threw at him by prostrating himself on his hands and knees. One of his edicts was, "Whenever you've made a mess of something, find an innocuous place like the bathroom to give an earnest apology, so you don't get yelled at in a more public location." My sudden apology made Fitz panic, and it seemed we were headed in a direction where he was likely to forgive me. Success!

"Rudy—um, I mean, Rudeus, was it? What are you doing here?"

"Just a bit of research."

"Into what?" Fitz pressed.

"The Displacement Incident."

When I said that his brows knitted together. Had I said something odd?

"The Displacement Incident? Why?" he asked.

"I lived in Asura Kingdom's Fittoa Region, and I was teleported to the Demon Continent after the incident."

"The Demon Continent?!" Fitz said. I thought his surprise a little over-exaggerated.

"Yes. It took three years for me to return home. My family has all

been found since, but there's still one acquaintance of mine that's missing. This seemed like a good opportunity to do a little research."

"Is that why you came to this school?"

"That's right." I couldn't tell him the real reason was finding a cure for my erectile dysfunction. Besides, I wasn't lying; I wanted to know why the Displacement Incident had occurred.

"I see. You really are amazing, after all," he said, scratching at the back of his ear.

I wasn't sure what was so 'amazing after all', since I hadn't discovered anything yet. Perhaps he'd recognized my power after our mock battle the other day. Well, whatever. "And what, might I ask, are you doing here?" I said.

"Oh yeah. I'm carrying some documents with me. I have to go now. I'll see you again, Rudeus."

"Yeah, sure, see you."

Fitz hurriedly turned away, heading towards the front of the library. However, after just a few steps, he suddenly looked back. "Oh, right. You should read a book by Animus that's about teleportation, called *An Exploratory Account of the Teleportation Labyrinth*. It's creative nonfiction, but easy to read."

And then he ran off.

He didn't seem to be holding a grudge about the exam. Maybe he was actually a pretty good guy.

I went to the librarian to ask after the book *An Exploratory Account of the Teleportation Labyrinth*, and read it until lunchtime. It was a slim volume, not even a hundred pages thick, and told the tale of about Animus Macedonius, an adventurer native to the northern regions who went exploring a labyrinth.

This labyrinth, appropriately called the Teleportation Labyrinth, was a rare kind whose traps were all teleportation-themed. There were five types of beasts who dwelled within, all highly intelligent creatures who understood the layout of the labyrinth and where the teleportation traps would send a person. If you were unlucky enough to step on a trap, you'd find monsters waiting for you on the other end. It was difficult to avoid those traps during combat, and if the battle turned chaotic, your party would be immediately separated, so this labyrinth

was classified as being incredibly dangerous.

As Animus and his companions dove into the labyrinth, he studied the teleportation traps he found there. There were mainly three types of traps. The first was a fixed one-way teleporter. It would send people to the same location every time, but there was no way to return from there. Another was a fixed two-way teleporter. There would be a magic circle at the destination, and you could use it to come back. Finally, there was the random teleporter, which transported you to a random destination.

The basic strategy adventurers employed in the Teleportation Labyrinth was to use the magic circles to repeatedly teleport themselves deeper in, but random teleportation circles were mixed in with the others. If you mistakenly stepped on one of those, you would be separated from your party and forced to fight a swarm of beasts by yourself.

Animus' book contained his research and theories about how to tell the random teleporters from the others. In the middle of his journey, he figured out how to tell them apart, and rapidly progressed deeper into the labyrinth. But he got carried away, forgetting that his method wasn't foolproof. At the end of the story, he misidentified a trap and stepped on a random teleporter. Surrounded by a vast number of enemies, he lost one arm but somehow managed to escape alive. However, he'd lost all three of his comrades in the process. Animus himself could no longer fight, so he abandoned his life as an adventurer.

The story ended with a line saying he'd leave conquering that labyrinth to the reader. I couldn't tell whether this was fiction or nonfiction, but having your party scattered and preyed upon by monsters like that sounded pretty scary.

Unlike the RPG dungeons of my previous life, which were built with the intention of being solvable, it was perfectly possible to never make it all the way through this world's labyrinths. Based on what I'd heard from other adventurers, labyrinths were generally laid out in a way that allowed you to reach the middle where the magic crystal was located, but it wouldn't surprise me if there was at least one trick labyrinth out there without a real end point.

The back of the book was filled with theories about random teleportation. The nomenclature wasn't entirely accurate, since the teleport range of the random traps was predetermined to a degree. Also,

while you could teleport into the middle of a cave, it was exceedingly rare to be teleported into the earth itself. Animus hypothesized that this was due to resistance between the mana at the destination and the mana of the person being teleported, which was the same principle that explained why you couldn't cast an offensive spell right into a person's body.

This was something I already knew... although healing magic *did* involve running magic through another person's body. I suspected it was connected to why I couldn't cast healing magic without an incantation, but we'd leave that for another time.

As for teleportation, I wondered if there was an exception to the theory. After all, you could channel offensive magic into the dirt. Perhaps teleporting people into solid matter simply required an obscene amount of magical power.

As I ruminated, the noon bell rang. Time was a fleeting thing.

I met Zanoba and we headed for the cafeteria, which was a separate building. It had three floors, each for different kinds of students. The third floor was for human royalty and nobility. The second floor was for human commoners and beastfolk. The first floor was for adventurers and demon folk. It was more a method of classification than one of discrimination; the school had probably reasoned that if the human nobility ate alongside the adventurers and demon folk, it would only fan the fires of potential conflict.

As an adventurer myself, I was fine with dining on the first floor, but...

"Come, come, this way."

I got the meal set that Zanoba recommended and let him drag me to the third floor.

"Urgh..."

The moment I emerged from the stairs, all gazes on the upper floor immediately turned towards me...possibly because I exuded the stench of a commoner, but also, my clothes had seen better days. Because of the cold, I had my old gray robe over my uniform. It was

five years old, and its sleeves were tattered, its front marred by a large seam across the chest. With my recent growth, my clothes were also a size too small. To put it frankly, I looked completely disheveled.

Unlike on the first and second floors, not a single person wore a robe to protect themselves from the cold. It was full of people in cozy-looking cloaks and cardigans. They might as well have been wearing suits, while I was the only one in sweats.

“Zanoba, I don’t think I fit in here. Can we at least eat on the second floor?” I pleaded.

“No, not the second floor. Linia and Pursena are there.”

“Okay, then how about the first floor?”

“The first floor is full of heathens who don’t know any table manners. It’s not a place fit for royalty like me to go, no matter how briefly.”

“Okay, then let’s just eat separately,” I said finally.

“Don’t be heartless. Do you know how much I’ve suffered, not being able to see you again until now, Master? You can at least eat a meal with me.”

“Don’t ask your master to suffer in your stead.”

We were arguing at the head of the staircase, and despite its width, the students passing by made it seem like we were blocking them. Suddenly a burst of noise came from below: a chorus of shrill voices, gradually getting closer.

“Aaah, Lord Luke!”

“Lord Luke, I’m next!”

“Aww no way, Lord Luke, not fair.”

“Lord Luke, can I come on your next date?”

A handsome man, surrounded by women, was coming up the stairs.

“No, I’m sorry,” he said. “I’ve already decided I can only take two girls on a date at one time. I only have two arms, you know, so if I invited three girls one would be left out, right?”

“Aww, that sucks.”

“Hehe, sorry. But I am a popular man, you know. Let’s go on a

date some other time. I think my left arm is free next month.”

Those unbelievable words spilled from the mouth of the young man who resembled Paul. On either side of him was a girl whose uniform bulged in the chest area. His arms were wrapped around their waists as he climbed the stairs, laughing carelessly. I was pretty sure he was the guy I’d seen at the opening ceremony. Luke or whatever. What was his last name? Skywalker?

Our eyes met.

“It’s you...” His eyes narrowed. The carefree look on his face turned grim. “You’re Fitz’s...”

I bowed my head. So he knew about my match against Fitz. Fitz didn’t seem angered by what happened, but perhaps his companions were pissed on his behalf.

“A pleasure to meet you, I’m Rudeus Greyrat. I’ll be under your guidance during my time here at the school, since you’re an upperclassman. I hope you’ll look out for me.”

“Yeah. I know. I heard about you from Fitz. Apparently, you’re insanely forgetful.” Luke looked at me, disgruntled.

Insanely forgetful... was I really? I didn’t really get it. What did he think I’d forgotten?

“You know my name already, don’t you?”

“No, I don’t.” I shook my head as I was suddenly asked a question reminiscent of a certain Fist King’s younger brother, figuring it was better to honestly confess my lack of knowledge than give a half-baked answer.

“So you’ve chosen to pay it no heed. That makes sense.”

“Uh, sorry. If it’s no trouble, would you mind telling me your name, then?”

Still disgruntled, Luke stared at me for a few beats before huffing, and spat out: “Luke Notos Greyrat.” Then he shoved past me.

“Ugh, what the heck was that about? I can’t believe it!”

“Seriously, that robe was sooo lame! It was totally worn out at the edges!”

“If it’s falling apart, he should just go out and buy a new one!”

His groupies followed in his wake, spewing insults, but their words went unheard by me. Luke Notos Greyrat. My father's birth name was Paul Notos Greyrat. Was Luke an illegitimate child? No, that couldn't be. Paul had long ago disavowed the name Notos. Luke had to be a cousin or something.

"Master, you've caught the eye of an unpleasant character."

"I guess I have, huh? If that exchange was anything to go by."

"That was Luke, one of the Asura Kingdom's upper nobility. He's technically a student, but he's one of Princess Ariel's guards."

"Regardless, let's forget about eating here," I said.

"I suppose we have no choice."

We compromised by eating outside. The weather was nice and I used my earth magic to conjure some chairs and a table, creating an insta-café terrace. Zanoba expressed his awe at each spell I cast by shouting, "Whoa!" It delighted me to see how deeply moved he was.

As we ate, Zanoba told me about Princess Ariel and her group.

Ariel Anemoi Asura, age seventeen. Second Princess of the Asura Kingdom. The only daughter of the crowned queen, and still third in line for the throne despite her relative youth. The queen's health had taken a downturn after giving birth to Ariel went poorly, leaving her unable to conceive another child.

Also vying for the throne were First Prince Grabel and Second Prince Halfaust. The powerful people of the Asura Kingdom formed factions behind them, hoping to back the prince who would become king, then reap the benefits.

However, with the size of each group, not all were certain to get a taste of the honey that trickled down. Even the ministers were ranked in a hierarchy, so it was given that those at the bottom would be ignored. When the Second Princess was born, those who felt they wouldn't benefit from their candidate's succession switched their loyalties to her. However, hers was the weakest of the factions, and during the chaos of the Displacement Incident, some of the group's most powerful members lost their standing. Multiple attempts were made on the Second Princess's life, and under the pretense of studying abroad, she escaped to this school.

The Princess brought two guards with her. One of them was Fitz.

Silent Fitz, as he was nicknamed. A magician who used voiceless casting and had killed an assassin targeting the princess. People knew he was an elf, but it was a complete mystery where he was born and raised. Only a handful of people could teach voiceless casting, but his master was unknown.

Ariel and her group were tight-lipped about Fitz's existence. Rumors abounded that the Asura Royal Palace had raised Fitz in secrecy, as part of an organization of heartless killing machines. Which definitely wasn't true, judging by my conversations with him.

Her other guard was Luke Notos Greyrat. The second son of the current head of the Notos family, Pilemon Notos Greyrat. Since birth, he'd been trained to become one of Princess Ariel's guardian knights, and continued in that role in the event that the princess managed to regain power and return to the struggle for succession. From the moment he enrolled in the school, he'd been continuously bathed in limelight, making him a target of envy, fear, and respect.

In closing, Zanoba said: "But be forewarned, some of this information is my own conjecture."

"Yeah. Thanks. Actually, you're really knowledgeable."

"Because I was forced to look into the matter."

"By whom?" I asked.

"Two foolish beastfolk."

"Linia and Pursena, huh?"

"Indeed." His face was the very picture of anguish. Had they made him their errand boy?

"Zanoba... are you being bullied by those two?"

"Bullied? No, I've merely conceded defeat after losing to them. That's all."

"Conceded defeat, huh?"

Zanoba looked slightly conflicted, even as he spoke flatly. If he was fine with his circumstances, that was one thing. But the effects of bullying were often easily overlooked by others. I wanted to help him... but I didn't know the extent of my would-be opponents' power. Beastfolk were often quick to jump to conclusions, and I didn't want to make enemies of them.

Of course, there were plenty of good beastfolk, like Ghislaine. At the end of the day, though, I was always on the side of those being bullied.

“If they’re doing something to you that you don’t like, please tell me. I might not have much power, but I’ll help.”

“Hahaha, it’s nothing for me to bother you with, Master, rest assured. More importantly, let’s talk about figurines!” he said with a laugh.

Guess I’ll just monitor the situation a bit longer, I thought.

I returned to my wandering after lunch. I couldn’t think of other places I wanted to have a look at, so after a cursory glance around, I headed back to the library.

I searched for literature on teleportation, but I’d never used a library before. It took me a while just to look through the stacks of books. The library let me peruse a catalogue of their collection, from which I singled out books with the word ‘teleportation’ in their titles. After that I hunted them down through the sea of shelves. That alone took several hours. On top of that, most of what I did collect was either not detailed enough, written in technical jargon, written in a language I didn’t even know, or required prior knowledge about the subject matter to make sense of it.

“If I’m going to hunker down and research this, I’d like to have a notebook.” There was a limit to what I could hold in my memory. I decided to leave the books for tomorrow and left the library.

Outside, the sun was setting and students who’d finished classes were gradually making their way back to the dorm. Some seemed to be headed for the library. I went in the opposite direction to the school store, which was by the entrance to the main school building.

The store was full of students shopping quietly. A cursory glance around revealed magic textbooks, magic crystals, robes, wooden swords, beginner wands, bags, shoes, and soap, among other daily essentials. There were also food items like dried meat, smoked meat, as

well as bottles of drinking water and alcohol. I bought a random selection of paper, pen, ink, and some string to tie the paper with. Couldn't be attending school without even the most basic supplies.

By the time I left, it had grown dark outside. There were no streetlights here, but the path was still faintly lit, so I continued down it. Even though winter was already over, there was still snow on the walkways. I trod carefully and hurried toward the dorm.

No one else was around. I could hear a distant hustle and bustle, but it felt like I'd wandered into an empty space devoid of people. The path from the main school buildings cut in front of the women's dormitory and continued forward. I headed unthinkingly down that path.

That was when it happened.

"Hm?"

Something descended from above. It was white, but it wasn't snow. Instinctively I grabbed hold of it.

"Ooh."

What opened up before me was pure white fabric. It had embellishments on it, but they were subtle and elegant. The proper name for this particular item was "panties," and fairly high-quality ones at that. At the very least, they looked more expensive than the ones Elinalise normally wore.

Perhaps someone was trying to hang them out to dry? I looked up and saw someone peeking over the edge of one of the verandas. Probably the person who'd dropped them. I thought our eyes met, but it was dark, so I couldn't discern their face. It felt like I'd seen them somewhere before.

"Um, you dropped—"

"Gyaaaah! Panty thief!"

Huh?



The scream of a female student came not from above, but from behind me. Panicked, I turned around to find the screaming person pointing their finger at me. *This is a misunderstanding!*

But it was already too late. Moments after the scream, the windows on the other verandas swung noisily open. Then figures came leaping out from the first floor, one after another.

Before I realized what was happening, I'd been surrounded, the panties still in my hand. I had no idea what was going on.

"Uh, um, uh..."

"Hmph!"

Standing at the forefront was a well-muscled girl, or maybe a woman. Or a bandit, or a gorilla. Her shoulders were almost twice as wide as mine. Was she beastfolk... or no, a demon? "Perverted scum!" She spat on the ground as I stood there, confused by the sudden verbal abuse. The gorilla was considered the sage of the forest, but it was hard to think of her that way.

What the hell? Why was I being called a panty thief? Sure, I was a fifteen-year-old boy with a healthy interest in women's underwear, but I hadn't stolen these, or even tried to sniff them. I'd just caught them as they fell and then tried to give them back to the person who'd dropped them.

"Hold on," I said. "Please wait, I haven't done anything."

"You haven't done anything?" The gorilla grabbed my arm. "Then why don't you tell me what's in your hand?"

Well, yes, I was holding panties in my hand. Judging by the look on her face, she considered that proof enough. I could feel everyone's hostile gazes on me, and my legs began to tremble.

"Aren't those Princess Ariel's? I don't care how much you might admire her, it's a brazen act to do something like this at this hour. You should be ashamed!"

The other girls chimed in at the gorilla's biting words, saying, "That's right!" and, "You pervert!" and, "Drop dead!" Enough was enough. I already felt like crying.

"Now, come with me. We'll make you regret this so much that you never do it again!"

She hauled me away by the arm. I attempted to resist her, but all I did was leave skid marks from my shoes. I thought I'd toned my body quite a bit, but her strength was on a whole different level. I mean, her arms were two or three times meatier than mine.

At this rate, I was going to be dragged inside for an unspeakably horrific beating, and all because of a false accusation. Should I run? Even though I hadn't done anything wrong? But running would be like proclaiming my guilt... Was this like when a man got falsely accused of feeling a girl up on the train? Would they hear me out if I tried to talk to them? It seemed like they'd already made up their minds that I was guilty.

No, I had to stand my ground. I hadn't done anything wrong.

I used earth magic to anchor my feet in place. The gorilla looked back in surprise, then sneered. "Oh, what's this? You plan on resisting? How gutsy for a panty thief! You really think you can fight this many people?"

A good question. I surveyed them and felt good about my chances. I'd fought off much worse in my time as an adventurer; I could take these girls. Still, fighting back would be as good as confirming my guilt. I might be falsely accused, but if I kicked up a fuss, I might get violence against women added to the charges against me—and this one would be true, too. It might even get me expelled.

"Wait! Don't do anything to him!" A boy's voice, slightly high-pitched, rang out.

"Lord Fitz!"

"What! Lord Fitz?!"

"Such a beautiful voice..."

"What's he doing here?!"

The crowd split, revealing a petite boy with white hair and sunglasses—Fitz. He cut between me and the buff woman to explain the situation. "Sorry. That's the underwear I was trying to hang out to dry, but dropped. He picked them up for me." His shoulders trembled as he tried to catch his breath.

"Fitz... sir. I realize that you're in charge of washing Princess Ariel's underwear. But," the gorilla continued, "despite the late hour, he was still walking in front of the dorm. Even though it's been agreed that

once the sun sets, this path is only to be used by women.”

Really? I didn’t see a sign saying so.

Fitz looked at my confused face and shook his head. “He’s new here. And a special student on top of that, so he rooms alone and doesn’t have a roommate. He must not have known about the more intricate rules of the university. I’d like you to let this one pass.”

He sounded frantic; even I could hear the panic in his voice. I wasn’t sure why, but I was grateful.

The gorilla turned in my direction. *Is that true?* Her expression seemed to ask.

I bobbed my head up and down.

She kept a firm grip on me as she studied Fitz’s face. “Hm, it’s surprising that you’d go this far to defend someone. What you say must be true. Still, the fact remains that this boy violated the dorm rules. We’ll make an example out of him by punishing—what?!”

As she spoke, she’d tried to pull me along, but then froze. Fitz had whipped out his wand and thrust the tip of it right into the gorilla’s face.

“Didn’t I just say he did nothing wrong? Enough. Now let go of his hand.”

“F-Fitz... sir?”

The hint of anger in his voice that stirred murmurs around us. Even in the darkness I could see the gorilla’s face blanching.

“Or would you all like to be sent to the medical office?” His voice might be high-pitched, but there was definitely murderous intent behind his words. I could hear the girls gulping around us. How badass.

“Tch... fine, I understand.” She let go of me, albeit a bit violently. Forced to comply, the other girls backed off as well. My wrist smarted, but it didn’t look like any healing was necessary.

“Lord Fitz, I’ll let this slide. But you over there! You better not show your face around the girls’ dorm at this hour ever again! Next time I see you, I won’t show you any mercy!” The gorilla spat those words before ducking back into the window she’d leapt out of. The other girls also sneered at me as they disappeared. In an instant they were all gone.

“Phew... that girl. If only she’d listen.” Fitz breathed a sigh as he watched her go. He looked back at me and his head drooped. “Sorry. If I hadn’t dropped that underwear, this would never have happened.”

Just why on earth was a boy like him washing underwear in the girls’ dorm, anyway? Or so I wanted to ask...but he *was* the Princess’s highly trusted and capable bodyguard, so he must’ve had special permission. He seemed like an honest man, and a harmless one. He was reliable, young, and his glasses made him seem all the more dashing, though I’d call him cute rather than handsome.

Crap. My heart was pounding, even though the person in front of me was a guy.

To put it nicely, I might be falling in love. To put it crudely, I was ready to lick his feet.

“You haven’t done anything wrong. You helped me,” I said.

“Helped you? They’re the ones who would’ve been injured if you’d seriously resisted.”

The reason he was so frantic hit me. He must’ve thought that they would get injured if I unleashed my power. So he’d been acting to ensure their safety...but even so, I felt the compassion in his actions. If this were a shoujo manga, this would be where our love story began.

“Still, that came out of nowhere. What did she mean?” I asked.

“Yes, well, it’s like Miss Goliade said. When the sun sets, male students aren’t allowed to come near the girls’ dorm.”

Apparently, the gorilla from a moment ago was called Goliade. The name certainly emanated strength. A perfect example of someone’s name matching their physique.

“Really? But that wasn’t written in the school rules,” I protested.

“It was decided between the students living here at the dorms. When the sun sets, the boys aren’t allowed to use that road, and must take a detour to get to theirs.”

An unwritten rule, huh? It would’ve been nice if someone had told me about it beforehand. Like Zanoba. “I didn’t know.”

“It’s not your fault,” he said. “Just be careful next time.”

“I will.”

He didn’t need to tell me twice. I probably wouldn’t take that path

again—not even in the middle of the day. I still couldn’t bear having the hostile glares of an entire crowd trained on me.

“At any rate, thanks for helping me,” I said. “If you hadn’t come to rescue me, I don’t know what would’ve happened.”

“Don’t worry about it. I only did what anyone else would do.”

What anyone else would do... really?

In hindsight, I had a lot of memories of being misunderstood or falsely accused these past few years. It had started with the beastfolk, then Paul, then Orsted. Was my face that untrustworthy?

However, Fitz hadn’t arbitrarily decided I was guilty. In fact, he stuck up for me, even though I was partially at fault for what had happened. He seemed the easygoing sort—he clearly wasn’t holding a grudge over the exam. And he’d even given me advice at the library. He had a lot of clout within the school, but he hadn’t let it get to his head. Instead, he’d carefully evaluated the situation and figured out how to help me.

He might look like a boy, but he was a man of character. An upperclassman, in every sense of the word. I’d made up my mind. As a show of my respect for him, I was going to call him Master Fitz.

“Besides, Rudeus, you could’ve gotten out of that without hurting anyone, couldn’t you?”

“Not at all. I’m truly grateful to you, Master Fitz.”

When I bowed my head, he bashfully scratched at his cheek. “Ahaha, it feels kind of weird to hear you thank me.”

“Oh? Why is that?”

When I asked, he just grinned wide, showing his teeth. The smile caught me off guard. “That’s a secret.”

And just like that, my first day at the school ended.

Interlude: Sylphiette (Part 1)

IN THE MORNING, I woke to the sound of birds. It was still fairly dark outside when I peered out the window.

“Mm... Aaah...”

I pushed myself upright in an attempt to shake off the drowsiness as it clung to me. Then I slipped out of the bed, which was neither luxuriant nor crude, and stretched.

From beneath my bed, I pulled out a bucket, filled it through magic, and washed my face. Then I began to warm up for my morning exercises. I sat on my haunches and stretched my feet, then spun my arms in circles to loosen my joints and shoulder muscles, and finally took a deep breath.

My body seemed to be in good condition today. It must've been thanks to the good dream I'd had. Rudy had starred in it. He'd made love to me. I didn't remember why he'd done it, but I did remember how happy it had made me. I was disappointed when I woke to discover it was only a dream.

I traded my pajamas for clothes that were easy to move about in; a light brown top and pants, made of soft material. Not the least bit sexy.

Just as I was about to leave, I stopped. “Oh, I can't forget this.”

I donned a giant hat that completely covered my hair and ears, and stepped from the room.

The room next to mine was a luxurious suite. It contained a canopied bed, tucked within which was the *Princess* with her beautiful golden hair. Her face looked angelic as she slept, and there was no indication she'd wake soon. It was still too early for that.

I crept in quietly, so I didn't wake her, and went to the room beside hers. Seated there in a chair, looking a bit drowsy, was a young

man. He wore an ordinary shirt, but his pants were made of leather and he had a sword hanging at his side. His hair was white, and a large pair of sunglasses hid his face. He was petite enough to almost resemble a woman, but something about his body was clearly masculine.

On the table beside him was a bell. If he rang it, the linked bell in the neighboring room would also ring. A signal for the two waiting nearby—the *Princess's Knight* and the *Princess's Attendant*—to come flying this way.

“Good morning, Fitz.”

“Mm... morning, Sylphie.”

When I greeted him, *Fitz* smiled softly and returned the gesture. This *Fitz* was one of the *Princess's Attendants*, and my friend. His attendant duties kept him busy, but when we had time off, he studied voiceless casting with me. He was a very studious person. I suppose you could say I was his master, though of course, I would never call myself as such.

Fitz wouldn't move from his position until the *Princess* awoke. He was very dedicated to his job, after all.

“You're going running again today?”

“Yeah. It's important to be consistent with exercise.”

“Alright. Have fun.”

I left, slipping into the deathly-still hallway, which was currently blanketed in a kind of quiet that was characteristic of the morning hours. I loved this kind of quiet. This place was always bustling and noisy, but during this particular time, it was still. It was silent at night too, but that felt eerie, like something was lurking out of sight.

I moved stealthily down the hall so as not to wake anyone else, creeping down the central staircase to the first floor and slipping right out the front. A few steps into the faint darkness, I turned back. An enormous building with a red roof filled my horizon. The Ranoa University of Magic's student dormitory.

My daily morning routine was a jog. It was something I'd been

doing ever since Rudy and I were separated. Running was important. I hadn't understood that immediately after Rudy left, but I did now. Being able to continue running when you were at your limit, convinced you couldn't go any further, became the difference between life and death. No matter how good you were at magic or swordplay, in the end, the most important thing was stamina.

That aside, I also loved running. There were only two things I could hear during an early morning jog—the sound of my feet and the sound of my breathing. Those two things banished my thoughts and cleared my mind. I was at my sharpest when I was running.

“Huff... huff...”

One of my goals for the start of each day was to keep running in the Magic City of Sharia until I couldn't run anymore. By doing that, I wouldn't just become familiar with the city's layout, but also learned my physical limits. No-one had taught me this, but it was something I thought Rudy might do if he were in my position.

I ran through the Workshop District. It bustled with commerce and with people noisily unloading their goods, but this part of it was quiet. Although...when I looked in the direction where I sensed people moving, it seemed the craftsmen had already begun their work. In which case, perhaps, they'd actually going to be going to bed right after this.

I ran by a corner shop with a strange name, and decided to turn down an unfamiliar narrow back alley. The layout of the Magic City of Sharia wasn't particularly complex, but it was honeycombed with many small alleys I wasn't familiar with. I intended to memorize all of them. Rudy would no doubt do the same in my place.

“Ah, so this is where it leads?”

The alley opened onto a street I knew. It led from an area in the Workshop District full of artisans' workshops and dwellings, to a part of the Commerce District where stores were lined up side-by-side, separated by the large, winding main road. I hadn't realized there was a smaller street connecting them. It was likely a path the artisans used daily. Now that I knew it, I could take a slight shortcut from the school to the Commerce District when I went shopping.

The accomplishment brought me joy. I continued running.

After jogging around the city for a bit, the sky grew light.

Watching the sunrise was one of the rewards for rising early. I liked the sunrise. The sight stayed constant no matter what country you were in, which brought comfort. I never tired of seeing it.

That said, I must've been gaining some stamina lately, because the sun was beginning to rise before I was even close to tiring out. I might need to wake a little earlier tomorrow morning. Still, I returned to the school for now.

When I got back to the dorm, the *Princess* had just woken up. Still half-asleep, she sat up in bed, sluggishly crawling out of it.

"Sylphie... morning," she greeted me, stretching her arms wide.

"Yes, good morning."

That was the cue for my sleepless friend from the next room and I to start dressing the *Princess*. I'd struggled with the duty at first; her clothes were fundamentally different from what I was familiar with, with masses of buttons and lace. But last year, the university instituted uniforms that were well-designed but somehow simple to wear, so it was now easy to dress the *Princess*. All I had to do was unbutton her pajamas, slip them off, put on her undergarments and—

"Sylphie, I don't feel like wearing a brassiere today."

Occasionally she would make selfish requests, but I didn't complain. As things stood, I was essentially her servant. I listened to what she said and moved according to her wishes. I didn't mind—after all, she'd saved me in the aftermath of the Displacement Incident, when I didn't know up from down—but I'd come to realize that she'd only done it for her own benefit. She took advantage of who and what she could. Still, it was because of her that I'd survived this far, and I wanted to help her as much as I could, considering how painful it was for her to be exiled from her homeland.

I honestly didn't know what she really thought of me. I admired her kind demeanor, but I'd begun to understand her true colors. She had a smile that bewitched all who saw it, but it was mostly insincere. It was a smile intended to reassure the other party and move them in a way beneficial to her. She wore that smile frequently. Perhaps all the smiles I'd seen from her had all been lies. I saw them so often it made me wonder.

Still, she'd saved me. She'd treated me like an equal and been there for me when I was painfully lonely. As such, she was a friend to

me. The second one I'd ever made. You might even say she was my *best* friend. She wasn't like Rudy, but I was glad to have a friend like her. Seeing her true colors hadn't made me hate her. She was lonely now, too, and struggling in a foreign country, and it was my turn to help her.

"Sylphie, what's wrong?"

"You look more natural when you don't smile, Princess."

"Oh my... you're the only person who would ever say that to me," she said with a laugh. Was this one fake, too? Of course, even if it was fake, it didn't necessarily mean she was displeased.

On another note, the *Princess's* skin was beautiful and smooth. I couldn't hold a candle to her, especially now, all sweaty and covered in flecks of dirt from my jog.

"Alright. I'm finished, Princess."

"Thank you. Now go shower before we eat."

I returned to my room as I was told, hauling out the bucket and using magic to fill it with warm water. This country was still cold at this time of the year, so it was nice that I could use magic for things like this.

"Phew..."

A brassiere, huh? The *Princess* had such a variety, and they were all really cute. Most were ones she'd brought with her, but some were purchased at a discount from the Asura Kingdom, through a place called the Remate Company in Sharia, which had a vast assortment of underwear, among other things.

Meanwhile, my chest was flat even for someone with elf blood. Depressingly flat. Flat enough that I didn't even need a brassier.

"I wish they'd get even a little bit bigger..."

The elf blood ran thick in my veins. Rudy had introduced me to the concept of a genetic throwback, but really, couldn't I have had one well-endowed ancestor? My originally green hair meant there was demon blood in my family line, and my mother was half-beastfolk, so she'd been blessed in the chest department.

To be perfectly honest, I wanted them to get a little bigger. Even just a little. My unfeminine body hadn't bothered me in the past, but it might make a difference to my future. It would be devastating to meet

someone I liked and be mistaken for a man.

“Hmm,” I sighed as I wiped my body down and got dressed. I was wearing a brassiere, of course. I didn’t think it was necessary, but the *Princess* had ordered me to wear one.

I dumped the dirty water in a bucket in the corner of the room; I’d use it to do the laundry later. “Alright, let’s give it our all again, today.”

I slapped my cheeks before stepping out of the room.

Classes were boring. Most of them were about things Rudy had already taught me, and sitting in on them made me keenly aware of how much he’d known about magic. Even when I asked him questions about things not in the magic textbook, he’d readily answered.

I was taking a lot of difficult classes on combined magic lately, but they mostly came down to, “If you combine this magic and this magic, this phenomenon occurs, but we’re not quite sure why.” Apparently, no one had yet cracked the code behind how combined magic worked. But Rudy had known about it. Maybe he’d only had his own theories, but he explained them in a way that I could understand, and most of them made more sense to me than the teacher’s.

“Hey, Sylphie, what’s the operating principle behind this magic?”

“Oh, that... if you take a stone from a campfire that’s turned red-hot and put it in a pot, the water heats up too, right? It’s the same concept.”

As I listened in on the boring lectures and recalled Rudy’s teachings, the *Princess* would occasionally ask me questions and I would answer. She was passionate about her studies, even if these things wouldn’t be of much use to her when she returned home. She wasn’t just trying to get good grades—she was trying to understand magic.

Combined magic was difficult, but despite the fact that many in our year were failing out of this class, the *Princess* was trying hard. It was endearing seeing her passion. I liked people who were optimistic and passionate about their studies. Rudy had been like that, and I liked people who reminded me of him.

I was content with my current position partly because I considered the *Princess* a friend, but also because I didn't mind serving someone. To put it simply, I liked doing things for other people more than I liked doing things for myself. The *Princess* and my *friend* seemed frustrated by this at times, telling me to form my own opinions, recommending that I find things that I liked doing for my own sake. But there was nothing I really wanted to do. My parents had gone missing during the Displacement Incident, but they'd already been found. Or rather, I found out that they'd died. If I found something I wanted to do, I'd turn my attention to it. Until then, I was content assisting someone like the *Princess*, who had big plans and big ambitions.

For now? You might say there was something I sort of wanted to do...no, those weren't the right words. How should I describe it? It was a... complicated feeling.

"Sylphie, Sylphie!"

"What is it, Princess?"

"The next class is practical skills. What are you spacing out for?"

"Oh, yes. I understand."

The student body of this university was diverse. Many came from the Ranoa Kingdom, the Duchy of Basherant, and the Duchy of Neris, but there were also those humans, like the *Princess*, that came to study abroad from faraway countries in the Central Continent. There were beastfolk and elves from the distant Great Forest, and demons from the Demon Continent. Aside from the humans, many of the students were of mixed blood, so I blended in.

The dorm was fully furnished, and as long as you could pay the enrollment fee, you were assured of your daily necessities. On top of that, you could enter the Magicians' Guild once you graduated. It was easy to become a professor of magic at a school in another country if you were a member of the Magicians' Guild and held a diploma from the University of Magic.

That wasn't all. The more years you spent at the school, the more classes unrelated to magic you could take. Even acquiring a trade was easy, which was why you had people who'd worked as adventurers for a long time, but used the money they'd made to enroll at the school as soon as they retired.

The practical skills class was about actually using the magic that you'd learned, but focused mainly on mock battles. Taking this class with former adventurers proved particularly interesting. They might not have the best grades in the lecture-based classes, but they demonstrated their true abilities on the battlefield. They were strong, straightforward, and practical. Even those who were approaching middle age conducted themselves cleverly and moved more nimbly than students younger than them.

Some of those younger students had their own original moves and techniques, but that originality was the only interesting thing about their abilities, and it didn't necessarily get them far. The former adventurers were different. Every action they took, even ones that might seem pointless or futile at a glance, led them to victory.

"You're as strong as ever, Master Frict. If it's not too much trouble, would you mind giving me some advice?"

"You're about a half-step too slow at taking the initiative. You can't pressure your opponent if your attack doesn't reach them. Get closer," he instructed.

"I get it. If your opponent thinks you're actually going to hit them, it'll affect their ability to evade, even if just slightly. Right?"

I'd learned a lot from this class, too.

Frict was the oldest in our class. He was about forty-six, I think; not great with lecture-based classes, but in the top tier when it came to mock combat. He used a long staff reinforced with steel, and during mock battles, he'd chant spells while rapidly moving forward, occasionally pausing incantations to whack his opponent with his staff or kick them. The other students resented him for using melee attacks even though we were supposed to be practicing magic, and avoided him in mock battle.

Personally, I didn't see the problem. Frict was the only one who took the mock battles seriously. The battles were conducted inside a magic circle, which was large, but still presented a limitation. Given these circumstances, it made more sense to actively engage your opponent and hit them than it did to stop moving and trade magical attacks.

When we were younger, Rudy had trained as if each battle was real. I was convinced that was the right approach. I wanted to follow

Frict's example, and so, I actively sought him out as an opponent during mock battles.

Incidentally, Master Frict's goal was to become a professor at the university. I admired people who knew what they wanted out of life.

Once class was finished, I was back to looking after the *Princess*. She and the others were constantly working toward the fulfillment of her ambitions, and though I didn't fully understand what was going on, I helped where I could.

"We're going shopping today."

"Understood."

She didn't have anything particularly conniving planned for today, it seemed. We sometimes took a day to relax after a big group discussion, though such days were few and far between, depending entirely on the *Princess's* whims. Well, calling it a whim wasn't entirely correct—it was something she decided after taking our mental states into account.

Traveling to such a far-off foreign country had taken its toll on the *Princess's* followers. The *Princess's Attendant* had something akin to a nervous breakdown, and I'd been terribly sad when I discovered my parents were both dead. These breaks were meant as a change of pace, to ensure we weren't so overwhelmed by sadness that we became useless.

"Are you going out dressed like that?"

"There's no purpose in wearing fancy clothes when that's exactly what we're going to buy."

Normally the *Princess* and her *Attendant* dressed to the nines, but for some reason they were indifferent about their outfits when they went shopping. Meanwhile, just walking into the *Princess's* favorite shop made me incredibly self-conscious about how we looked to those around us.

"Come on, please hurry."

A handful of us accompanied her as we left the university and

walked down the main road. It drew the attention of those around when the *Princess*, her *Knight*, and her *Attendant* all moved as a group. The *Princess* was beautiful, the *Knight* was dashing, and the *Attendant* was striking.

I followed behind, but could tell that everyone's gazes were glued to the *Princess*. She'd become infamous in this town. Just as she'd planned. It made me kind of happy to think about how I'd helped that happen.

"Oh." I suddenly remembered my jogging path that morning. "If we're going to the clothing store, I found a good route for us to take. It should be a shortcut."

"Truly? Well then, please escort us."

The *Princess* wore a bright smile. I took notice of it as I guided her down the path I'd just newly discovered that morning.

"Ahh, so there was actually a road here... Not a very convenient one considering how complex and narrow it is, but it does have its appeal."

"Considering how old the buildings are, it must be a remnant of the town from when it was first built," the *Knight* remarked as he looked around.

Sharia was an old city. In the modern day, with the university at its center, the city had developed shopping districts that were easy to find. But when the city was first built, it wasn't as neatly compartmentalized. Long ago, when the Magicians' Guild had a stronghold here, its streets had been intricate and complex. While part of Ranoa, Sharia sat right on the borders with Basherant and Neris, and its labyrinthine layout had been designed to deter the possibility of invasion from the other countries.

"And here I was sure you weren't paying attention in class, Luke."

"No, that's just something I picked up from a girl I went on a date with the other day. Some of them are well-informed."

The *Knight* was gathering info about the city in a different way than I was. I didn't think much of his methods, but the constant dates with girls were likely a part of his own self-care.

"Try not to play around so much that you get stabbed in the back."

“I’m a man of the Notos household. I make sure to put distance between myself and any troublemakers.”

A man of the Notos household, huh? Come to think of it, the Notos blood also ran through Rudy, right? He was probably a ladies’ man, too. I remembered how his attitude toward me changed the moment he discovered I was a girl. He’d probably keep skirt-chasing even after he got married to someone. His father certainly had. Mister Paul had only had two women, but that was because his wife, Miss Zenith, was a follower of the Millis faith, which insisted on monogamy.

I wondered how many partners Mister Paul might have had if Miss Zenith hadn’t been one of the faithful. Three? No, probably more like five. The *Knight* was from the same Notos bloodline, and he hated being tied down, too, so it was probably a family trait.

I wasn’t a member of the Millis faith, but if I were going to get married, I wanted my partner to focus on me and only me. Rudy probably wouldn’t like that, though, so I’d have to be open-minded if we got married. I never wanted him to feel like I was being overbearing. He might even break up with me, though I didn’t really think he would. If he did bring another girl home, the best course of action for me, as his wife, would be to acknowledge her and get along with her. If there were more than three of us, I’d act as a mediator to keep them all from fighting—wait, no, no, no. Wife? Why was I assuming Rudy and I would get married in the first place?

“Sylphie, what’s wrong?”

“No, it’s nothing. Uh, this way.” I escaped from my wild delusions when the *Princess* asked me a question. I couldn’t believe what a fool I was, dreaming about a future that would never come. A sigh trembled upon my lips.

“Ah, so this is where it leads. It’s definitely a shortcut,” the *Attendant* said in astonishment as we left the alleyway. Our destination, the clothing store, sat before our very eyes.

“Indeed. This is quite the achievement, Sylphie.”

“Ehehe.” I scratched at my cheek when the *Princess* complimented me, and we stepped into the clothing store.

I returned to my room after dinner. When it was time to sleep, I looked at the underwear spread atop my bed.. A matching brassiere and panties.

“Hmm...”

Earlier, at the store, the *Princess* had gone straight to the underwear section. Then, after an intense discussion with the *Attendant*, they bought me underwear. That’s right. *Me*.

“You need to have some sexier underwear, Sylphie, in order for you to feel confident and take charge when the right time comes,” she told me. Perhaps she’d heard me mumbling to myself that morning. Still, what the heck did she mean by “when the right time comes”?

They’d forced me to try the items on in the store. It might sound arrogant to say as much, but I thought the underwear, with its pale green fabric and lace flowers, suited me really well. My body was still so thin I could be mistaken for a boy, so you couldn’t quite say I looked sexy in them, but... maybe if Rudy saw he’d at least think I look cute.

“Rudy, huh?”

Suddenly, I remembered what I’d been thinking about during class that afternoon. The thing I wanted to do.

Perhaps what I wanted was to get along with Rudy. It was thanks to him that my life was like this right now. I wanted to make friends with him and return the favor—no, that wasn’t quite right. It wasn’t just about that. These feelings surely didn’t come purely from gratitude. Most likely I... yes, I guess I really did...

“...”

My face heated up as I reached a conclusion. I dove into bed as if trying to shake it off and hugged the blanket close. I curled into a tight ball, resisting the urge to roll around.

I knew what it was I wanted to do right now. I finally knew. But then, suddenly I realized something. When I did, I clenched my jaw tight.

“What should I do...?”

I closed my eyes after blurting out those words.

I didn't sleep very well that night.

Chapter 4:

The Beginning of My School Life

A MONTH HAD PASSED since my enrollment. Rudeus the

Quagmire's school life was a monotonous one. First I woke up in the morning, then, as had become my daily routine, I began my training. According to a manga I read in my previous life, there was a man who did push-ups and squats a hundred times, ran ten kilometers, and sacrificed his hair to obtain enough power to become the strongest in the world. I didn't want to lose my hair, so I had to work a little harder than him. More specifically, by practicing with my wooden sword. Such training had value only because I did it on a daily basis.

Apparently, there were others at this university who were also passionate about exercise, because I spotted a girl going for a jog again this morning. I didn't see her face because her hat was pulled over her eyes, but she looked fit, if a bit thin.

After returning to my room, I did a bit of magic training. I was making a figurine again for the first time in a long while. Zanoba kept hounding me to teach him my skills, so this was partially a refresher for me. I hadn't made much progress with this one, though, since Zanoba kept interrupting to summon me to breakfast. The dining order in the dormitory's cafeteria was determined by academic year and social position, but they were lenient with the time frames. They were busy in the morning, after all.

After the meal, I parted ways with Zanoba and headed for the library. My research into teleportation had gotten interesting. When the noon bell chimed, Zanoba and I would have lunch together. He'd ask me questions about things he didn't understand in class, and I'd answer to the best of my abilities. Zanoba was only taking earth magic classes, but he was still working hard, in his way.

We ate our meals outside. Elinalise sometimes came by, but apparently Zanoba didn't look like a "good man" in her eyes, so she would quickly scamper off. I asked her how she was dealing with her situation, since she wasn't allowed to bring men into the women's dorm, and she said she went into the city at night to quench her thirst.

Impressive stamina.

On a separate note, this cafeteria had a lot of food that catered to my palate. It had things like nanahoshiyaki (the pseudo-karaage), as well as something that tasted similar to curry, called kerry soup. It wasn't amazing, but I liked that it tasted like something from my previous life. They definitely maintained a menu that the various races here could enjoy.

In the afternoons, I took a class on the foundations of healing magic, divine magic, and barrier magic. Divine magic was especially effective against ghost-type creatures or beasts with a gaseous form. From a theoretical standpoint, I figured it was likely similar to Disturb Magic, using mana in its rawest form to strike your opponent. Granted, just smacking something with pure mana didn't actually do any damage, so there had to be more to it. Perhaps I'd be able to understand that sort of stuff if I'd been an exorcist in my previous life. As it was, I was just learning the theory behind it and memorizing each incantation.

I was taught you needed to change the type of magic you were using to counter your opponent. If you wanted to become a skilled divine magician, it was important for you to be able to analyze your opponent. But surely that requirement applied beyond divine magic? On that note, first-rate swordfighters could apparently cut right through ghosts. No need for analysis. I'd seen a number of ghost-type beasts while I was operating as an adventurer, but never a swordfighter who could cut through them.

Barrier magic was, as the name implied, magic where you created a protective wall. These were basically constructed using magic circles, but at the Beginner-tier you could also create them through incantation. Magic Shield had the power to isolate flames or cold and reduce their effect. The magic-resistant bricks of the university, as well as the inn's fireplace, were most likely developed from this magic.

If there was a shield that could protect against magic, surely there was one for physical attacks as well? When I asked the teacher about it, they told me that the Millis faith owned the rights to both divine and barrier magic, so the university could only teach the basic levels of both. Apparently Physical Shield was an Intermediate-tier spell and not something I could learn. The teacher could use that magic and even teach it, but it was illegal to do so. If they violated the law and got caught, the Millis faith would hunt them down and put them on trial.

In fact, it used to be that the university wasn't even allowed to teach the basics of those schools of magic. It was only about two years ago, after agreeing to certain conditions, that they were given permission. Given those circumstances, I was told that the class was instead going to focus on how to break through barriers.

There were two types of barriers, those proofing against magic and those proofing against physical objects. Once a person was Saint-tier and above, they could create barriers that combined both aspects. There were also various other uses, such as a barrier to protect oneself and a barrier to lock something inside.

My old teacher Roxy had also taught me about barriers, but at the time, I'd been satisfied just with the knowledge that they existed and more or less tuned out the rest of what she said. So it was informative to review and have someone re-explain them for me.

I returned to the library once class was over. There, I spent my time researching teleportation until it became dark outside. I did technically go hunting through the literature, but as a result of teleportation magic being labeled a forbidden art, there wasn't anything listed in detail. The book that Master Fitz had told me about, *An Account of the Exploration of the Teleportation Labyrinth*, might be the most extensive written information out there.

After that I returned home to the dorm, ate dinner, and then, after working on the figurine a little, went to bed. My lifestyle had found a rhythm and I was beginning to feel relaxed, but my little man's appetite, or rather lack thereof, remained unchanged. The healing magic class never touched on any subject related to ED, of course, and there were no books on how to cure such a condition in the library, either.

There was no sign I'd recover.

Then one day something happened.

It was evening and I was in the library researching teleportation when Master Fitz approached with his white hair and sunglasses. He had a somewhat fashionable cloak over his school-assigned uniform,

sturdy-looking boots and snug white gloves. I'd run into him several times now, but it felt like he was always wearing the same things.

"Rudeus, mind if I sit beside you?"

"Sit beside me? That makes it seem like we're strangers. Here, please have my seat. I warmed it for you."

"Ahaha, sorry for the trouble." Master Fitz grinned widely and sat down. He seemed like someone who was adept at responding to social situations. Once I moved seats and continued my reading, he peeked over to see what I had in my hands.

"Are you making progress?"

It'd been a week since we'd last spoken about it. I had been digging through books about teleportation every day. "I now know that there were apparently other incidents in the past that resemble what happened in the Fittoa region," I said. Fitz had given me a head start on my research after all, so I decided sharing what I'd found was a way of showing my gratitude. It wasn't something worth hiding, anyway. "It wasn't on as large a scale as the Fittoa displacement, but there were cases of people abruptly disappearing one day and then suddenly returning another."

In other words, being spirited away. A single person would vanish and then either reappear in another place or reappear in the same place. This phenomenon was quite common... well, not quite, but it seemed to happen occasionally.

"I wonder if that's the same thing as the teleportation in the Fittoa region?"

"Hard to say... hm?" When I happened to look at what was in Master Fitz's hands, I noticed he was holding a book about teleportation. "Are you perhaps helping me?"

He shook his head when I asked. "No. I'm also looking into the Displacement Incident."

"So that's it. Why are you going to all that trouble? Did Princess Ariel order you?"

"Not quite..." He put his hand to his chin as if he were considering his response and the corners of his lips lifted as he chuckled. His laugh was one of self-deprecation. "To tell the truth, one of my acquaintances went missing during the incident."

“Oh, uh, I’m not sure what to say...” I remembered the list of the deceased back at the Refugee Camp—how many hundreds of names had been listed on it. It had been five years since the disaster. The chance of survival for those still missing was basically zero. I was sure Master Fitz’s acquaintance and anyone else still missing was probably already deceased. I was one of the lucky ones since my entire family was still alive.

“Oh, I recently found out they’re still alive, actually,” Fitz interjected.

“Huh? Oh, really?”

“Yeah. I’d been researching teleportation up until then thinking, if I could figure out the pattern behind where people were teleported, then it would make finding them easier. That’s why I looked into it.”

A pattern behind where people were teleported to, huh? Interesting, I’d never considered that before. “Incredible as ever, Master Fitz. That’s an insightful idea.”

“No, it’s really not that special. Besides, I wasn’t able to search for them in the end anyway,” Fitz replied, his head drooping.

Based on what I’d heard, the Second Princess had lost her standing approximately a year after the Displacement Incident. Of course there must’ve been signs she was headed down that path even before then, and as her bodyguard, Master Fitz must’ve been really busy during that time. “That’s not your fault.”

People had their own duties to fulfill. He couldn’t just abandon them to participate in his own search. In fact, he’d actually used his position to access the university’s library and conduct research on the incident. The fact that he knew his acquaintance had been found also meant he’d been gathering information. He had his own life to live and work to do, but even then he’d done what he could. That was enough in my opinion. “Instead of dwelling on the past, let’s think about what to do from here on out. And on that note, would it be possible for you to tell me what you’ve found, Master Fitz?”

“Yeah, sure. I can gather my findings and bring them tomorrow. Just don’t expect much. I’m not really good at looking things up, so I can’t discover things as quickly as you do.”

He didn’t seem very confident. Fitz had said he was a fourth-year, right? He was attending classes, acting as a bodyguard, and, according

to what I'd heard the other day, also carrying out routine tasks for Princess Ariel. He'd also mentioned being involved in the Student Council. Even though he had all of that going on, he'd still carried out his search, refusing to escape the matter with the excuse that he was just "too busy." That made him incredible in my eyes.

"I just have more time to spend on it than you do," I assured him. After all, I was spending all my time before noon looking into the matter. I'd actually seen the epicenter of the disaster, and with my knowledge from my previous life, I had some ability to predict things.

"Uh, um... hey, Rudeus. There's something I want to talk to you about." Fitz was suddenly scratching the back of his ear as he looked down toward his lap and mumbled.

I tilted my head. "Yes, what is it?" I owed him for helping me the other day as well. Whatever it was, I wanted him to feel free to tell me.

"I'd like you to let me help out with your research into the Displacement Incident."

I felt incredibly humbled by his offer. "No, in fact I should be the one assisting you. I'm the one who just began my research recently. I don't even have much information on the topic."

"But I don't have that much time to spend on it. Even if we partner up, most of the work will fall to you. Does that... bother you? Having someone like me who just comes in here occasionally, butting into your research."

It might bother me if someone who barely spent any time helping came in just to lambast my progress, but he didn't seem the type to do that. Besides, it was probably better to have someone with a different perspective weigh in rather than work on it all by myself, right? I wasn't that smart anyway, and Fitz was considered a genius, so he might be able to find something in the data I gathered. "It doesn't bother me. I look forward to working together."

"Yeah, me too."

We shook hands and Fitz gave me a toothy grin. The look on his face, combined with the softness of his hand, made my heart pound.

Was I seriously feeling this way toward a guy...? No, that was absurd. My emotions were just getting off track.

After that, I gathered what I'd researched for the day and headed home. By the time we left the library it was already growing dark outside. Master Fitz and I shared small talk as we walked back to the dorms. Between being the Princess's bodyguard and doing chores for her, he was kept busy daily, but once every ten days he got some free time in the evening.

"By the way, I saw you at noon. You were amazing."

Noon? I tilted my head at the word. What was I even doing then?

"I was shocked to see *the* Zanoba Shirone following after you like a little puppy."

"...hah." By noon he meant when we were eating at our insta-cafe terrace, bathed in the attention of surrounding students.

"You might not know this, but when he first enrolled he was a violent troublemaker that just fought with everyone."

I laughed bitterly upon hearing the "troublemaker" part. I should've guessed as much. It seemed he wasn't being bullied after all. Which made sense: someone who could pull off a person's head with their bare hands wouldn't be bullied so easily.

"Although he did quiet down eventually, after Linia and Pursena—two ill-behaved students—did him in."

So Linia and Pursena were the leaders of the delinquents, apparently. They challenged the new student Zanoba, who was lashing out all the time, and rather easily managed to defeat him, two-on-one. Considering how strong he was I wasn't going to call that unfair. After that, they started treating Zanoba like their underling. I hadn't really witnessed that myself, though.

"Linia and Pursena might try something with you, so be careful," Fitz warned.

"I think I'll be fine on that front." I'd already acted deferentially towards them. For the moment, I doubted they were planning anything behind my back. I wasn't sure where the delinquents gathered, but I'd almost never seen them at the cafeteria.

"Um, well, I don't think they would take too kindly to you meeting with me."

"And why would that be?" I asked.

“Well, when we were still first-years they tried to interfere with Princess Ariel. I then engaged and defeated both of them.”

“Two-on-one?”

“Yes. That’s why they—well, might be resentful toward me.”

So that was it. Still, based off what he was saying, Master Fitz was quite strong. He’d defeated Linia and Pursena, who had themselves defeated Zanoba. Hey, hold up. That meant I was the strongest since I’d defeated Master Fitz, right?

Nah, no way. It was just a bad match-up. I could use Disturb Magic so I was better against an opponent who could use voiceless casting. My opponent being caught unawares also worked in my favor. If he’d known I was going to use Disturb Magic when we fought, there was no guarantee I would’ve still won.

“I’m sure you’ll be fine, though,” Fitz said.

“Well, who knows about that.”

“There isn’t a person here who can defeat me one-on-one. I’d never lost a fight, not until you,” he said, praising me.

I should be the one praising him for his attitude. Here was someone who had never lost, finally tasting defeat at my hands. Yet he didn’t even hold a grudge. Wasn’t he frustrated that he’d lost?

“That magic—Disturb Magic, wasn’t it? That was amazing. Teach me how to use it some time.”

“Yes, certainly.” I would be happy to. Even if teaching him Disturb Magic meant I might not be able to defeat him anymore, the thought of refusing him didn’t even cross my mind.

“Oh, well, anyway, that’s what I wanted to tell you, so be careful. There are a lot of eccentric people among the special students. There’s Cliff, who’s short-tempered, and apparently even Silent caused a lot of problems when they first enrolled here. There’s also a former adventurer among the first years. A strange elf, I heard. They say she’s been attacking boys.”

“Ahh, that last one is an acquaintance of mine, so don’t worry.”

“Oh, alright then.” Not sure about the first two, but as for the last one, it was definitely a different kind of attack from what Master Fitz was thinking of. “In any case, I’ll be careful in how I conduct myself and

make sure not to start fights with anyone.”

We arrived at a fork in the road. The path straight ahead led to the girls’ dormitory. It was still light out, but I wasn’t going to walk that road ever again.

“Oh, I have some business with Princess Ariel, so I’ll part with you here.”

“Alright, thank you for today. I look forward to talking again.”

“I don’t have any free time tomorrow, but I will stop by the library,” Fitz said, before walking off toward the girls’ dormitory. He had free entry into that palace full of women. Probably the only reason why I didn’t feel jealous was because I could still remember that muscular terror from the other day.

Or perhaps, just maybe, I could use my connection with Master Fitz to infiltrate that palace, and that would be the key to achieving my ultimate objective here at this school. For the moment, I still couldn’t see the meaning behind the Man-God’s advice.

And that was how Master Fitz and I started working together to advance our investigation. I thought the two of us had gotten close. Partly because he was friendlier than I imagined, but either way we were building a positive friendship. Although he was still full of mysteries.

“By the way, Master Fitz, why do you wear those sunglasses?”

“Sunglasses... oh, you mean these?”

He never took them off. Not once, ever. No matter the occasion. “Mm, I do have a reason for it, but I can’t tell you. Sorry.”

“It’s fine.” I did want to see what his face looked like without them, but I had no intention forcing him to show what he was hiding. “Anyway, what floor of the dorms do you live on?” I asked. “I’ve never seen you at meal times.”

“Um, well, technically I’m sleeping over at the girls’ dormitory. I am Princess Ariel’s bodyguard, after all.”

“And... that hasn’t caused any problems?”

“It’s fine, I have permission. And I wouldn’t do anything that would cause Princess Ariel problems.”

You could keep a slave with you in the dorms if you got the permission to do so. It didn’t even have to be a slave. If you were a powerful royal or noble, then a little bit of financial compensation would work in your favor. There were, after all, some nobles in the boys’ dormitory that brought maids with them. However, if either maids or manservants caused any problems, their master would, of course, be responsible. Master Fitz wasn’t a manservant and was being treated like a student, but thanks to Princess Ariel’s charisma and the Asura noble family’s influence, the university was placing their trust in Master Fitz as an individual. Even that girl—Goliade or Big Van Vader, whatever she was called—spoke respectfully when referring to Princess Ariel or Master Fitz, acknowledging their authority.

Also, according to what Elinalise told me, Master Fitz was apparently quite popular with the girls. It was the newbies who squealed over Luke. Once they gained some experience levels, their hearts would tremble when they caught a glimpse of Fitz’s soft side profile. Having actually spoken with him, I didn’t have the same impression of him, but I could understand where they were coming from.

“By the way, I noticed you talk to me pretty normally,” I said.

“Hm...? What do you mean?”

“Everyone says you’re so quiet.”

“I, um... am actually pretty shy.”

And yet I’d gotten the impression he’d been the one starting conversations with me. Well, there were those that were on the same wavelength and those that weren’t, I was told, so maybe that was the reason. At any rate, people told me it was common knowledge at this school that Master Fitz was shockingly quiet. He’d even earned the nickname “Silent Fitz” or “Silent Magician”. Though that was probably partially because he was a magician who used voiceless magic.

“Actually, your last name wouldn’t happen to be Ryback, would it?” I asked.

“Huh? Ryback? Isn’t that the last name of the second North God? No way, not at all. Besides, I don’t even have a surname. I’m not a noble or anything.”

“There you go being all humble. Be honest, you’re actually an extremely good cook, aren’t you?”

“Uh, I *can* cook, but... what does that have to do with anything?” He didn’t get my joke. And yet he did chuckle, though I wasn’t sure what it was he found funny. That’s right, *the* man of mystery, Fitz, was laughing.

It was also a mystery why he was helping me. Still, I wasn’t fussed about unravelling that. If Fitz was being coy with his intentions—whatever they were—there had to be a reason for it. I had no intention being as ungrateful as to pry into the secrets of someone who had helped me out.

I would be lying if I said I wasn’t curious, though. Still, I kept the Man-God’s advice in mind. When I followed it, the person I met was Master Fitz. Judging by my experience with the Man-God up ’til now, things would wind up the same no matter what actions I took. In other words, by associating with Master Fitz I would eventually find out how to cure my illness. There was no need to rush.

Chapter 5: An Unreachable Power (Part 1)

ZANOBA SHIRONE, the Third Prince of the Shirone Kingdom. A

Blessed Child possessed of supernatural power from the moment he was born. And a pervert. An unmistakable pervert. You could say he was a figurine otaku who took things too far. By the time he'd realized it, he was gazing at them every day, and when the feeling struck him he'd gently caress them with his hand.

When he got excited, he lost control of his monstrous power, but he would never handle his figurines roughly. It might have been his love for them that ensured their safety.

Love. Yes, he loved figurines. He was very partial to them. For example, there was a bronze statue of a naked woman in his room. A slender and slightly lustrous figure of a woman that he'd bought before on impulse when he spotted it in the markets. When I first visited Zanoba's room, it was only to spy him also fully naked, his arms wrapped around the statue—my fault for not knocking. Zanoba hurriedly put his clothes back on and bowed to me, apologizing for showing me something so unsightly.

There was no need for him to explain what he was doing. His love was abnormal. Snow was still periodically falling in the Northern Territories and it was cold if you went outside, so it didn't take a genius to figure out how frigid a statue made out of metal must be. He was risking frostbite for the sake of his desire. No one could fake such dedication.

Still, I could actually understand where he was coming from. After all, I'd done similar things in my previous life. That said, I would never forgive him if he tried it with God's statue (Roxy's figurine).

Come to think of it, I didn't see her figurine in his room. I wondered if he'd left it behind in Shirone.

Or so I'd thought, until the events of that day.

I was faced with Zanoba suddenly prostrating himself in front of me. “Master, please teach me how to create figurines!”

It was evening and I held in my hands the beginning of a new figurine. For the past month I’d been continuously telling Zanoba to wait just a little longer. He’d waited like an obedient dog, but it seemed his patience was reaching its limit. “Didn’t you promise me! Why do you still refuse to start instructing me?!”

Zanoba seemed a little angry. I didn’t have a reason to turn him away, of course. I *had* promised him, and I’d been refreshing my skills for that purpose. The reason I hadn’t started yet was partly because things hadn’t yet settled down, and partly because I hadn’t found the opportunity to, since it wasn’t related to my goal in coming here.

“Zanoba, my pupil, be warned that my training methods are strict!” I purposefully added some dramatic flair to my speech. Zanoba’s face turned serious and he nodded grimly.

“Naturally. Master, I would ask that you please not underestimate my resolve. Even if I start spitting blood, I still vow to learn the secret techniques of your figurine creation.”

“Good, that’s the spirit.”

And that was how I started teaching Zanoba to make figurines. I used my time in the evenings before I went to sleep, about an hour or two a day.

I had an ulterior motive as well. This man’s love for figurines was genuine, and he also happened to be a royal, which meant he was rich. Although I’d once given up on the idea, his aid might allow me to add color to my figurines and begin mass-producing them. This world had the technology to create bronze and western-style statues. If we reappropriated that technology, we would be able to mass produce figurines, even though the quality might take a dip from the originals.

I would start with the mass production of the Roxy figurine. After that, I’d work on the Ruijerd figurine. I’d write a book glorifying the Superd Tribe for their loyalty, telling the story of the gulf between a hero the whole world recognized and a man it did not. I’d depict the struggles and conflicts he came up against as he worked hard even though people wouldn’t accept him. Then I’d slap the figurine on as a bonus item to go with it. It would be a set, a book with a free figurine. If that went successfully, I might put out another book lauding Roxy’s

achievements.

Yes, this could work! It might've been impossible for me to do alone, but despite his flaws, Zanoba was still a member of the royal family. He was loaded with cash and he had passion, too. He was the optimal business partner. There was that saying about not counting your chickens before they hatched, but I was already doing just that.

"Alright, then I shall begin imparting my special techniques upon you!"

"Yes, Master!"

Our figurine creation had just begun.

Let's just skip to the conclusion. He couldn't do it. Zanoba was incapable of using voiceless earth magic to create figurines.

There were two reasons for this. One was that he couldn't wield magic without incantations, and the other was because his total mana capacity was nowhere near enough.

To be fair, there were very few people in this world who could use voiceless casting. The only ones I'd met were Orsted, Fitz, and Sylphie. There had been another example at this school, a professor who could wield wind magic without using incantations, but he'd died last year.

I hadn't realized this, since I had been doing it from childhood, but voiceless casting was a high-level technique. In retrospect, neither Eris nor Ghislaine had been able to perform voiceless magic successfully, either. It made sense that someone like Zanoba, who'd just begun learning magic, couldn't do it.

The other problem was his mana capacity. For me, creating figurines was an effective way to use up my endlessly increasing pool of mana. But really, that meant creating a figurine required an immense amount of magical power. This was where I realized for the first time that I apparently had a considerably larger mana pool than most people.

I'd thought my mana pool was a bit bigger than most, but never thought the difference was that much. As an adventurer, seeing other magicians use up all their magical power, I'd just think, *that's because*

you guys are being too wasteful in the way you're using your mana. To demonstrate the difference in numbers, I used to think that if a normal adventurer had a max pool of 100, then I probably had about 500 in comparison. In reality, I apparently had much, much more.

Anyway, me aside—I'd never dreamed that Zanoba wouldn't even be able to construct a single part for a figurine. He tried hard. He woke up in the morning, exhausted his mana until he passed out, then woke up and used it again until he passed out. His cheeks hollowed out so much that his face looked like a skull with tears and snot streaming down it. The thing he wanted to do the most was a thing he had no talent for. That fact was clear to see.

What had I done to him? I reflected on my actions and apologized. "I'm sorry."

Zanoba shook his head and tiredly responded, "No, if only I were more skilled..." He had the look of a man stricken with grief. The look of a man so defeated he was drowning in his sadness.

We couldn't give up here, though.

"Alright then, let's try something different," I said.

"There's another way?!" Zanoba, who'd moments before been stricken with grief, suddenly recovered and sat forward.

"Yes, let's do the best we can and find a way that doesn't use magic," I said, conjuring up a clump of earth—clay, specifically. "I created this with magic, but you should be able to find it in the natural world as well." I'd heard tales of a famous potter who'd holed himself up in the mountains, but this world's mountains and forests were plagued with danger. Maybe there were beasts out there made of something akin to clay?

"What are you going to do with that?"

"Chisel it."

Chiseling. This was the most primitive, most reliable, but also most difficult method. You would chisel down the clay to make each part. This would make figurine creation possible even for someone without mana. The only problem was that we didn't have chiseling tools, but we should be able to find those by searching for magic items on the marketplace. I'd seen a knife somewhere before that could carve through boulders as if they were butter.

“Now I understand, Master. With this method, even I should be able to create figurines!” Zanoba raised his voice in excitement. His face was full of hope.

That hope, however, was easily crushed one short hour later.

Zanoba’s fingertips were not very dexterous. That stemmed from the power he was born with—his supernatural strength. That’s right—his “blessing” was getting in the way. He could restrain himself enough to not break things, but that was the extent of his control. Doing delicate work, such as chiseling each part with careful precision, was difficult for him.

Zanoba worked hard each day, his eyes turning bright red as he did so. His passion was genuine. He was so devoted to creating figurines that he forwent sleep and worked himself to the brink of death. None of it went according to plan and he had to redo his work countless times. Each time that happened he would cry, scream, and emit other strange noises.

Finally, he completed it—a figurine that he’d created himself, from scratch. It was most definitely not a beautiful work of art. It was amateurish and those in my previous world would have snorted in laughter or made memes out of it. But I knew that this was a representation of his passion, so I absolutely would not laugh. Yet even without my derision, Zanoba himself knew it was poorly crafted.

“Master, I can’t do it. I... I can’t make figurines like you!” he sobbed, as if so stricken with grief that he no longer had the will to stand. He’d grown even more skeletal in the last two months, but despite noticing that, there was nothing that I could do for him.

“And that’s what happened.”

I had decided to look to Master Fitz for support. It was truly wretched for me, as Zanoba’s master, to disclose his failings and seek advice from a stranger, but I wanted to borrow someone else’s wisdom. I felt such pity for my pupil.

“You’re creating... figurines? With magic?” Fitz was unable to

comprehend it. We were sitting with our chairs side-by-side, and he tilted his head as he listened to my story.

“Yes, like this.” I used earth magic to quickly produce a simple human figure. As discreetly as possible, of course, since magic was forbidden in the library. The simple figure I instantly created was one that resembled a naked sarubobo.

“Whoa. What is that? That’s amazing!”

Master Fitz’s gaze was transfixed as he closely examined the figurine I’d created. Then, as if to test whether he could do the same, he channeled mana into his fingertips and conjured a clump of mud whose twisted shape resembled a slime.

The fact that he immediately tried to imitate what he’d seen was amazing to me. His magic, however, hadn’t taken the shape he’d hoped. In the end he let out a breathy sigh and gave up. “I can’t do it,” he said.

Well, my technique for creating figurines was something I’d diligently worked on over a long period of time. I’d be in tears if he could copy it after only seeing it once. Still, it seemed like he’d be able to do it if he practiced. He could use voiceless magic, after all.

“This isn’t a technique a normal person can imitate,” Master Fitz concluded.

“True. As an alternate method I thought it might be possible to try chiseling down a clump of clay, but...”

“But his fingers aren’t dexterous enough to do it,” Master Fitz concluded. He hummed and put his hand on his chin as he thought. He had a habit of doing that when he was mulling over something. The sunglasses made him look exceptionally dashing in that pose.

On a similar note, whenever he was embarrassed or troubled by something, he’d scratch the back of his ear. Such behavior was fitting for his age and just endeared me to him even more. Granted, I’d heard elves had long lives, so they weren’t necessarily the age that they appeared.

“Hmm... oh yeah! I’m not sure if it’ll be any help, but there was someone with a similar case to Zanoba’s in Asura’s capital.”

“Someone with a similar case, you say?”

“Yeah, they had something they wanted to do themselves, but they didn’t have the necessary skills or abilities,” Master Fitz

elaborated.

“So what did they do?”

When I asked, he hesitated to respond, scratching at the back of his ear. “Uh, well, they made a slave do it.”

“Aha.”

According to Master Fitz’s story, this person in the capital had the necessary knowledge but not the abilities, so they purchased a slave, had someone teach them how to do it, and then had that slave create what they wanted.

“Based on what you said, uh, Zanoba likes the figurines you make, and he’d like more of them, so he said he wants to make them himself, right?” Fitz clarified.

“Huh...? Is that what I said?”

“Um, that’s how it sounded to me?”

Really, was that the case? Well, while the normal figurine enthusiast might remodel or paint a figurine, they wouldn’t think about trying to make one from scratch. The most I’d done in my previous life was enjoy a little bit of nude remodeling.

“I’m sure that Zanoba would like you to become his personal figurine creator, but he knows that’s impossible, so that’s probably why he’s asking for this instead.”

“I don’t actually think that’s impossible, though,” I added. I could live in the Shirone Royal Palace, employed by Zanoba, making figurines every day. That wouldn’t be a bad way to live my life. Working in a royal palace would give me reliable income, too. Now that I thought about it, how much was Master Fitz receiving from Princess Ariel? I felt like it’d be rude to ask.

“Well, I’ll try suggesting that option to Zanoba. Thank you for your advice.”

“Yeah, no problem.”

I bowed my head and Master Fitz gave me a toothy grin.

Why did I feel so shaken when I saw that smile? It was a mystery. A mystery of the already mysterious man known as Fitz.

Buy a slave, teach them the technique, and have them create a figurine. When I mentioned that plan to Zanoba, he immediately jumped on board and began joyfully planning his slave purchase. Apparently, though he did want to make figurines himself, he was entirely okay with taking this route if that proved impossible. Much as it surprised me, Fitz's proposal of having a slave do it instead was a widely-accepted method in this world.

Still, since we were in a master-pupil relationship, Zanoba said he felt it rude to request that I teach a slave instead of him. This was the man, after all, who'd sworn from the beginning that he'd learn how to do it himself even if he vomited blood. That was why he'd never propose this method himself, yet felt relieved when I suggested it.

"And so we've decided to go to the slave market during break next month." I was thanking Master Fitz for his help once again. I was really grateful to have someone I could seek advice from when I needed it.

"That's nice. I hope you find a good match." The conversation seemed to be over, but Master Fitz seemed a bit restless. "Oh yeah, I'm also free during break next month," he said.

"Oh really?"

"Yeah, so, um, since I have nothing to do, I was thinking about going into town, but I don't really have anywhere in particular I want to go, or any friends, so I'd be all alone..."

He was desperately hinting at something with his words. Was it really okay for a bodyguard like him to go into town? Didn't he need to be by the princess' side in case something happened? Well, none of my business. Luke would probably find a way to make it work. "Uh, would you like to come with us during next month's break?" I asked.

"You don't mind? I won't be in the way?"

"Not at all. And as a way of thanking you for your advice, I'll treat you to a meal."

"Really? Then I'll happily take you up on that offer," Master Fitz said, giving me that toothy smile as he laughed.

That was how it became the three of us going to the slave market. Next time: A flower in both hands?! A heart-pounding shopping

adventure with the smiling elf and the prince with supernatural strength!

Just kidding.

Chapter 6: An Unreachable Power (Part 2)

“NICE TO MEET YOU. I’m, um, Fitz.”

Master Fitz was a bit nervous meeting Zanoba. Zanoba, on the other hand, marched right up to him. “I am Third Prince of the Shirone Kingdom, Zanoba Shiro—aaah!”

He was acting so arrogant that I hit him in the knees, forcing him to stoop. I usually wouldn’t police how people conducted themselves with a superior, but Fitz was an upperclassman, and Zanoba could stand to lower his head a little at their first meeting, surely.

“Zanoba, Master Fitz is the one who proposed the solution we’re using. Show him the appropriate amount of respect.”

When I said that, Zanoba bent at the waist. “Understood, Master. It’s a pleasure to make your acquaintance. My name is Zanoba Shirone, Third Prince of the Shirone Kingdom.”

“N-no, you don’t have to be so, um... formal. You’re a member of the royal family, so please don’t stand on ceremony.” Master Fitz waved his hands frantically as he positioned himself behind me.

Zanoba’s eyes widened. A great dissonance existed between a) the rumors about Master Fitz, b) Master Fitz’s physical appearance, and c) his actual mannerisms and speech. He was called Silent Fitz and feared as a magician who could wield voiceless magic, but when you actually talked to him, he was just like any other person his age. A kind upperclassman who looked out for his juniors.

“Well, now that the two of you have met, let’s get going.” With that, the three of us moved out.

The slave market was in the Commerce District. The buying and selling of slaves was a quiet affair on the Millis Continent and in the Central Continent’s southern region, but the Northern Territories were different. Here, most countries had legalized the buying and selling of slaves, and some even endorsed it. The slave trade was an essential part of the economy in the northern regions of the Central Continent, so

much that some countries would never survive without it.

People became slaves for various reasons. There were those orphaned during wars. There were those who were sold as children by their parents when crop harvests failed and they had no other options. There were also those who sold themselves as a way to save their family. There was even a rumor that a slave ranch existed in the darkest parts of the Thieves' Guild. The Magic Nations were generally prosperous enough that their citizens never had to resort to such means, but further to the east were several desolate villages that periodically sold off their children to slavers. Those slaves were then recruited by the Northern Territories' militia or mercenary bands, or bought by the government to serve as cannon fodder during war.

Most importantly, the Asura Kingdom had its own connections to the slave trade, buying up the most skilled or most good-looking slaves they could find. They were a rich country; even the people at the very bottom of their social ladder never knew hunger. Slaves who made it to the Asura Kingdom were winners—though you'd already kind of lost everything the moment you became a slave. Slaves from the north tended to be hardy and talented, so many traveled all the way up here to purchase them. As long as there was someone out there selling people, there were buyers to be found.

Before setting out, I had gathered some information from the Adventurers' Guild. Large cities had multiple slave markets, and this particular one had five. The less savory markets would sell off slaves who were sick or even on the brink of death, and though there were bargains to be found there, beginners like us wouldn't know the difference between a good deal and a scam. So instead, we made our way to a market that was both beginner-friendly and aimed at clientele with deeper pockets.

"Hm, this is quite unlike the market in my home country." Zanoba nodded in approval, as if he were impressed.

At a glance, the slave market looked like any other building. It was plain, comprised of three mud-and-stone buildings. Above the entryway were the words *Rium Group - Slave Market*. A brazier crackled near the entrance, and beside it stood a man clad in thick Arctic clothing topped with leather armor. He was thickly bearded, but didn't give off a disreputable vibe, though that might just have been because I'd gotten used to seeing such types in my time as an adventurer.

“So it’s not outdoors, huh?” Fitz remarked in surprise.

Slave markets were generally indoors affairs in the Northern Territories. For a simple reason.

“Let’s go inside.”

A blast of hot air enveloped us when we entered. Crackling fires were spread throughout the interior of the building, as were eight stages where naked slaves were lined up—obviously, not something you could do out in the cold if you cared about the slaves’ health at all. The market I’d been advised against visiting was held outside.

“Hm, there’s lots of shops here. Master, where should we go?” Zanoba asked.

“I’ve never done this before. Let’s just have a look around first.”

The eight different stores were all owned by slave merchants under the jurisdiction of the Rium Group. They had rows of slaves for purchase, ones they’d either bought or gathered from various places. I wondered if they kept going until they sold all of their wares, or if they were required to swap out with other sellers at a specific time?

The clientele gathered around them were fairly diverse: There were adventurers like me, people in noble attire like Zanoba and Master Fitz, townspeople, peasants, students, and merchants, including some merchants shopping for resale opportunities. There were even a few slaveowners in the mix, standing around with their newly-purchased slaves and merrily chatting among themselves.

The most shabbily-dressed characters might have been pickpockets—no, they wouldn’t be able to slip into a guarded market like this. Maybe they were slaves themselves, sent by their masters to find additional slaves to purchase. I further secured the coin bag hidden beneath my robes. Zanoba was the one funding the purchase of the slave, but I was the one handling his wallet. We’d be in deep trouble if someone came along and swiped it from him, after all.

“Uh, um, wow... they really are all naked.” Fitz was looking at the shops, his eyes wide with surprise. His face was bright red. I couldn’t be sure because of his cloak, but he seemed to be squirming, toes turned inward. “They, um, sure are big. So that’s how they look...”

I followed his gaze to a group of lean, muscled slaves, probably warriors. The female warrior in the center was particularly nice. She

was big. Not just her height, but the bulge of her chest, which was enough to make your mouth water. You might think melons like those would get in the way in combat, but I knew from watching Ghislaine fight that that wasn't the case.

"Is this your first time coming here, Master Fitz?"

"Huh? Oh, um, yeah." Master Fitz scratched at the back of his ear while shyly drawing his cloak tighter around himself, probably trying to hide his erection. Exactly the kind of reaction you'd expect from a virgin. I'd been like that once, though of course, I had a different reason for not reacting now. "S-so, Rudeus, you're used to this?"

It made me feel a little triumphant to think I might have more sexual experience than an upperclassman, but I'd only done it once, myself. *And* my partner ran off after it. Nothing to be proud of.

Still, it was true that I felt calmer now that I'd experienced it once. A bit too calm, as far as my lower half was concerned.

"I'm sure you'll feel more at ease once you get some experience," I assured him.

"Y-you sure about that? Hey, wait, that means *you* have experience..." He looked suddenly crestfallen.

Ah, you're still so young, I thought.

"Master, we don't want warriors, do we? We're searching for a race with dexterous hands that can use magic, right?" Zanoba jerked his chin at us, as if to say that our conversation was irrelevant to him. He had no interest in women, it seemed, even though he'd technically been married once. Guess his libido was just entirely absent.

"A race with dexterous hands—that's gotta be a dwarf, right?" I asked.

"A dwarf that can use earth magic. Though the latter is more important than their race," Fitz replied as we made our way around the shops.

Despite the size of the market, there weren't many dwarves among the slaves. Most of the people on sale were clearly warriors, and none had the dexterous hands we were looking for.

"Um, I think we could make do with a child even if they can't use magic yet, since Rudeus can always teach them that later," Fitz said.

“Why a young one?” I asked.

“It’s easiest to learn voiceless magic when you’re young.”

“Oh, really, is that true?”

“Yeah, it’s almost impossible to learn once you’re older than ten.”

Seriously? Although, come to think of it, Sylphie had been able to use voiceless magic but Eris hadn’t. Perhaps their age had something to do with it after all. “So it’s connected to age, huh?”

“Yeah. I might be mistaken, but this is the conclusion I’ve come to on the basis of my personal experience, my master’s, and the words of our professors. Also, if you start using magic by the age of five, the size of your mana pool will drastically increase. If you want to teach the slave how to make figurines using your method, then the bigger the mana pool they have, the better.”

“I thought the size of a person’s mana pool was fixed at birth,” I said.

“That’s incorrect. The textbooks may say so, but the truth is that a person’s mana pool ceases to grow once they reach the age of ten,” Master Fitz explained.

I see. That would explain why I had such a vast mana pool, having started using magic when I was about two or three. And since Master Fitz had said he was speaking from personal experience, he probably harbored an impressively large mana pool, too. “Have you also been using magic since you were pretty young?”

“Yeah. Well...a long time ago, my master saved me and I asked him to teach me, which is how I learned.”

“Aha.” Maybe his master had saved him from monsters in a forest, or something. No—if he’d been a child then, it was more likely that he’d been kidnapped. There was a thriving business in trafficking children in this world, and even with the sunglasses on, Master Fitz was good-looking. “So your master can use voiceless magic, too?”

“Yes. He’s amazing. I respect him deeply.”

“That’s great. I’d love to meet him,” I said. Meeting another teacher of voiceless magic could help me improve my own abilities.

Master Fitz gave a bitter laugh. “Uh, I’m pretty sure that’s impossible.”

“Really? I guess he must be a pretty important person.” Master Fitz was bodyguard to a princess, after all, so his master might be a court magician or something. Maybe he’d wound up being saved by such a person, become their pupil, and as he grew older, the princess’s bodyguard. Voiceless casting would be a piece of cake for an Asuran court magician.

“He’s, um... not highly-ranked, but he is from the Fittoa Region.”

“Ah...” Someone who got caught up in the Displacement Incident? So Fitz probably didn’t know where he was now. “I’m not really sure what to say, then... I hope he’s still alive.”

“He’s still alive. I’ve found him, in fact.”

Come to think of it, he had said that he’d started looking into teleportation to search for an acquaintance. So that was his master, huh? “Wait, then why can’t I meet him?”

“Hehe. That’s a secret.” Fitz grinned toothily.

Why was it that my heart seemed to pound when I saw his smile? Sure, I might swoon over fictional *otoko no ko*, but I wasn’t gay. Maybe this was my body taking drastic measures in its pursuit of recovery.

In keeping with Master Fitz’s suggestions, we settled on three criteria as we searched for a slave.

One, they had to be around five years old (any younger than that and there was a high probability they wouldn’t have a grasp of language).

“Yeah, that seems fine.”

Two, they had to be a dwarf (for their dexterous hands).

“Most dwarves are good with their hands and have an understanding of the fine arts.”

And third, they had to be a cute little girl (my personal preference).

“A girl? I don’t mind either way, but Master, aren’t you losing sight of our goal here?”

“Rudeus...”

It was my last requirement that led to both of them scolding me.

“Huh??”

We were all men here. I'd thought they'd agree with me, but I guess they weren't that type. Elinalise would probably have agreed with me...actually, no, she might suggest a cute little boy instead. She'd recently awoken to a love for shota, after all.

“That said, we can't expect a five-year-old to have had much education. If all they speak is the Beast God tongue, then we can forget about trying to teach them magic.”

“I speak Beast God. I can educate them.”

“Truly, Master, you know the Beast God language? You never fail to impress!”

“Heh, I guess.” I puffed up in pride at his compliment. I might not look it, but I was multilingual, after all! I'd even taught a five-year-old in the past.

Speaking of which—I wondered how Sylphie was doing? Elinalise and Master Fitz were testament to my fascination with elves, whose slender beauty—both men and women—would appeal to any old school fans of fantasy.

Sylphie had elf blood in her, and she would be about fifteen right now. I bet she'd grown into a green-haired beauty, and judging by what Paul had said, her magic skills had really advanced, too. Her fame should be spreading far and wide, and I'd know her the instant I saw her, I was sure. But I hadn't heard a single whisper about anyone fitting her description. I wondered where she was right now?

“At any rate, we've decided on our requirements, so let's try asking one of the merchants.”

I headed to the Information Center. Behind the desk was a macho dude with a slick, bald head and a mustache. He seemed puzzled when he saw Master Fitz and I, but then nodded in satisfaction once he spotted Zanoba.

“Um, excuse me, we're actually looking for...”

Macho ignored me and instead addressed Zanoba. “Hey there, welcome. Whatcha lookin' for? A fighting-type that can act as a bodyguard? We have some available right now that can be taught how to wield a sword. We do have some magicians as well, but you'd probably be better off going to the university in that case. Or are you

interested in the type that can, uh, you know? Nah, you don't even have to say. I can tell by your mug that you don't exactly attract the ladies. We have one curvy girl in her twenties. A former prostitute, so she's pretty skilled, and of course she doesn't have any diseases—aaaah!”

The man took an iron claw to the face and was lifted into the air.

“Don't ignore my master. I'll rip out that ridiculous wagging tongue of yours, and take your jaw off while I'm at it.”

“H-hey now! What are you doing?!”

Two guards swarmed in to subdue Zanoba, but he didn't budge an inch. In fact, all he had to do to fling them off was to shrug slightly. *Impressive*, I thought. This tall, underfed otaku had totally overpowered two brawny guards without even trying. So this was the might of a Blessed Child, huh? Well, strength did seem to equal power!

Oh, wait, I shouldn't be spectating. “Stop! Zanoba, knock it off. Down, boy!”

“Yes, sir!”

At the sound of my voice, Zanoba released the man. Now that he'd stopped, that gave the security guards pause as well. I flipped around to face them and bowed my head, as if that were the exact moment I'd been waiting for. I wasn't proud of it, but I'd perfected the speed of my bow in these past couple of years. Speed equaled swiftness!

“I'm terribly sorry about that, he just got a bit excited.”

“No, it's fine... just, try not to go too wild, okay? We'll draw our swords next time.” They happily let it slide, and I pretended not to notice the fear in their eyes.

The most unexpected thing, however, was Master Fitz's reaction. The moment the guards seized Zanoba, he stepped in front of me with his wand raised. His movements were incredibly fast, but unsurprising for a princess's bodyguard. I guess I was the only one acting like a chicken.

Well, whatever, on with the conversation!

“We're looking for a dwarf, about five years old,” I said, repeating our request to Macho.

The man trembled as he ran his eyes over the inventory list in front of him. He flipped page after page and his eyes narrowed. “We

don't really have many dwarves 'round here to begin with, especially five-year-olds."

It seemed our requirements were too specific, after all. Dwarves mostly lived on the Millis Continent, to the south of the Great Forest at the base of the Blue Wyrms Mountains.

"It doesn't have to be a dwarf. If they're dexterous with their hands, that'll do."

"Oh, we do have one. Just one." Macho tapped his finger against a spot on his inventory list. "A six-year-old dwarf girl. Her parents were in debt, so her entire family were sold off to slavery. She's not in the best of health, though. Malnourishment, I guess. Well, she'll probably be just fine once you get some food in her. She doesn't speak the human tongue, and since she's only six, she can't read, either."

"I see. And what's the status of her parents?"

"We already sold them both."

Come to think of it, I'd heard something in my adventuring days about dwarves who thought they could make it anywhere as long as it had a mountain. That logic worked fine if they left the Millis Continent to work in the King Dragon Mountains, but every so often, you'd get misinformed morons who came up north and found themselves unable to do anything productive. This was a perfect example of a worthless father whose entire family had to pay for his stupidity.

"Well, why don't we just go ahead and meet her then?"

Macho called out, and a merchant showed up. He was dark-skinned and heavysset, most likely from the Begaritt Continent or born to a parent from there. He was also sweaty, wiping himself often with the damp cloth around his shoulders, but the market was hot. I'd taken off my robe, and Zanoba had removed his cloak; only Master Fitz remained fully-clothed. In fact, he seemed perfectly comfortable, judging by the look on his face. Well, okay, his face was bright red, but that was for an entirely different reason.

The merchant introduced himself, extending his hand in Zanoba's direction. "Greetings, I'm the branch manager for the Domani store, a subsidiary of the Rium Group. My name is Febrito."

Zanoba was reaching for the man's face, so I forcefully took his

hand into mine and gave it a shake. “A pleasure, my name is Rudeus the Quagmire.”

When I offered my name, the man looked dubious for a moment, but his expression quickly shifted into a broad smile. “Oh, so you’re Quagmire! I’ve heard of you. They say you took out a straggler last year.”

“I was just lucky. My opponent was also weakened.”

Febrito took a brief glance over at Zanoba and Master Fitz. “I hear you’re looking for a dwarf today?”

“Yes, this man over here will be funding the opening of a new business venture. We’re looking for a child to drill with the necessary skills from a young age.” It was a haphazard explanation, but it wasn’t a lie.

“I see, I see. I can’t really recommend this particular individual to you, but...why don’t you have a look first? This way, please.”

We followed Febrito out back and to the slave storage. Well, I called it ‘storage’, but it was just lines of steel cages connected to pulleys. Each cage was just about a single tatami mat wide, with one or two people crammed inside. The merchants probably washed and oiled them to give them a sheen before putting them on display, but they were filthy right now, and a whiff was enough to make me crinkle my nose. Upon closer inspection, I saw weeping children and others with piercing glares full of murderous intent directed our way. There were a few others like us, conversing with other merchants in the storage area.

Febrito walked swiftly through the gaps between the steel cages, calling out to someone standing at the edge of the pathway. “Hey, is that one dwarf kid still alive?”

“Yep, she’s hanging on.”

“Where?”

“Over here.”

We went deeper into the storage area. The heaters didn’t seem to work all the way back here, so it was a bit chilly. Febrito’s subordinate stopped in front of a cage that held a girl with a blank look in her eyes, seated with her knees drawn up to her chest.

“Well, bring her out.”

“Roger that.” Febrito’s subordinate nodded and opened the steel cage, dragging the girl out.

The child had a collar around her neck and shackles around her feet. Her skeletal body was covered by pathetic rags. Her hair might have been orange once, but was now a disheveled, filthy mess with strands of gray peppered throughout. Her face was pale and her eyes were hollow as she wrapped her arms around herself, trembling. I realized it was chilly, but that didn’t seem to be the only reason for her quivering. It was a painful sight to behold.

“Strip her.”

Her shivering didn’t seem to bother Febrito’s subordinate, who quickly ripped the rags right off her. Her deathly thin, undernourished and underdeveloped body was left completely exposed.

Master Fitz’s face screwed up as he watched. “Rudeus...”

Even I felt no desire for the equivalent of a child who might appear in a Pulitzer Prize-winning photograph. I just wanted to hurry up and buy her so we could get her a meal and a hot bath. However, the girl’s eyes did concern me. Those empty eyes. I’d seen them somewhere before.

“As you can see, she’s a dwarf. Six years old, so she doesn’t really have any skills to speak of. Both of her parents were dwarves. Her father was a smith, and her mother crafted jewelry. She should have the dexterous hands you desire, assuming she’s inherited their skill, but the only language she knows is the Beast God tongue. We didn’t really think we could sell her, so her health isn’t in the best condition, either. We’ll give you a discount on that account.”

Master Fitz looked troubled as he approached the girl, putting a hand to her cheek. After a few seconds, her complexion improved a bit. He’d probably cast something on her.

“And she’s a virgin, of course, so you needn’t worry about any sexually transmitted diseases in the future. We’ll detox her just in case, if you decide to buy her. Though I can’t really recommend it.”

Master Fitz looked at me like a child that had found an abandoned puppy and brought it home with them. The girl met our criteria...but those eyes really bothered me. I had to check for myself.

“Hello there, miss.” I knelt down and called out to her in the Beast

God language. First, a conversation. An interview. "My name's Rudeus. What's yours?"

"..."

"You see, there's something I'd like you to do."

"..."

"Um..."

She just stared back at me with those blank eyes, not offering a single word in reply. Febrito's subordinate reached for the whip resting at his side, but I stopped him with my hand.

"Master, what is it?" Zanoba queried.

"She's lost all hope. She's got the look of someone who doesn't want to live anymore."

"You've seen someone like that before?"

"Many times. Long ago."

Both Zanoba and Master Fitz looked concerned, but I didn't intend to volunteer any more information about my past life if I could help it. Nothing good could come of it.

The emptiness in the girl's gaze brought back memories. I'd had the same look in mine when I was around twenty. I had no schooling, no hope for the future, no job prospects. All I could do was eat, crap, and survive. My eyes had been empty back then, too.

In hindsight, it hadn't been too late for me to turn things around. But instead, I'd sunk further into despair, become even more of a shut-in. My eyes had gotten even emptier. I'd lost all hope. I'd wanted to die.

"Do you not want to live anymore?" I asked in Beast God.

"..."

"You feel like everything's hopeless. I understand what that's like."

"..."

Her gaze slowly settled on me.

"If it's that bad, should I just end it for you?" My tone was light-hearted, but I meant what I said. There had been a time when I genuinely wanted to die. And when I didn't, I kept on living for a long, long time that I'd come to regret.

I couldn't save this girl. I could buy her clothes, I could feed her, I could even offer her kind words. But I knew better than anyone that that didn't equate to saving her. It wasn't saving a person to force them into something that they didn't want. If that were the case, it was better to end it for her. If, like me, she could die and be reborn into a better life, it might be best for her to call this one quits and try harder in the next one.

There were plenty of people out there who, for their own self-satisfaction, believed in platitudes like "you can do it if you put your mind to it." This girl was still young. She was just a child. after all. Things might get better from here as long as she gave it her all—or at least, that was what I wanted to say. But I couldn't do it, even though I'd continuously been told the same thing. Nothing short of death had cured my stupidity.

I had no idea whether this girl was the same as me. Ultimately, it all came down to whether the person concerned had the will to keep trying. I couldn't make that decision for her.

"..."

"Say something," I said in Beast God.

The girl didn't even flinch. She just very slowly opened her cracked lips. "I don't want to die," she muttered in a small voice.

It was a half-hearted response, but it would do. It was okay if she didn't "want to live." She at least didn't want to die, and that was enough for now.

"We'll buy her."

I wrapped the robe I was carrying around her shoulders. Then I used magic to warm her up and chanted a detoxification spell. Healing magic wouldn't do anything for her stamina, so we'd just have to get some food in her.

"Mister Febrito, how much?"

She was the equivalent of ten Asura large copper coins. That was her price.

We took the child to a wash area at the edge of the slave market to bathe her, then headed to the Commerce District to purchase clothes and other necessities. We finally wound up at a ritzy café—not somewhere I'd have gone by myself, but Master Fitz was the one who picked it. He fit right in, while Zanoba was completely unfazed, as befitting of royalty. The girl we'd just purchased was wholly focused on gulping down food, soiling the dress we'd bought her in the process. I was the only one who felt uncomfortable in such fancy surroundings.

Master Fitz seemed to be in good spirits. "Glad you like it," he said, as he stroked the girl's head. "By the way, Rudeus, what's her name?"

"What's your name?" I asked in Beast God.

The girl looked at me, puzzled. "Name?"

Huh? Was I not communicating the words clearly enough? I hadn't used the language for about three years now, but I'd done fine in the Great Forest. Maybe those in the Doldia village had indulged me the same way someone from Japan might indulge an American who showed up in Tokyo and claimed to be fluent in Japanese?

"Um, what are you called?"

"The child of Bazar of the Holy Steel and Lilitella of the Beautiful Snow Ridge."

I had no clue what was going on, so I just translated her words verbatim. When I did, Master Fitz simply replied, "Oh, okay," nodding to himself with a knowing look on his face. "Dwarves don't get an official name until they're seven," he explained.

"An 'official name'?"

"When they turn seven, they receive a name that's fashioned after something they're good at, something they're attracted to, or something they like."

So that was it. Master Fitz was knowledgeable as always. "Still, we need something to call her," I said.

"Her parents are gone. We'll just have to name her ourselves."

"We're going to decide on your name, now. Do you have any preferences?" I asked the girl myself, but she merely tilted her head. I was starting to worry about her apparent cluelessness. Was she really going to be able to make figurines?

“She’s a little girl. Let’s give her a cute name.” Master Fitz’s reasoning sounded like something a girl would say. It made me want to do the opposite and give her a tough-sounding name... but no, I couldn’t do that. We had to do this right.

“Zanoba, let us hear your opinion!”

Zanoba glanced my way. “Hm? Are you sure it’s alright for me to decide?”

“You’re the one who funded this venture, after all.”

“Then Julias it is,” he said, with no sign he’d given it any consideration at all.

“Isn’t that a boy’s name?”

“Yes, it was once the name of my poor little brother. The one I killed when I misjudged my own strength.”

I couldn’t quite control my face when he said that. I knew that Zanoba had killed his little brother, and been dubbed the Head-Ripping Prince for it, but didn’t know how to react to the indifference with which he spoke. Master Fitz just looked confused.

“She’ll be staying in my room, won’t she? She should bear a name that I feel a connection with.”

True. Zanoba’s room was one fit for royalty, and hence very spacious. My room would have worked, too, especially since I spoke a language she understood, but it just seemed more natural for her to stay with Zanoba, given that he was the one with all the money. You needed a permit to buy slaves and then have those slaves live with you, and such permits were easier for royalty to obtain.

“Well, that’s fine, but at least make it Juliette. She is a girl, after all.”

“That’s fine with me. Juliette it is, then.”

“Juli... ette, hehe, that’s a good name.” Master Fitz laughed merrily, as if he found something about the name amusing.

“From today, your name will be Juliette,” I relayed to the girl in Beast Tongue.

“Julie...?”

“Juliette.”

“Julie,” she said with a clumsy grin. Close enough.



And that was how Juliette (nicknamed Julie) came into Zanoba's care. As Zanoba and I started training her, she began to slowly follow after and support him in various aspects of his otherwise messy life. At night, I tutored her in voiceless magic and the human tongue. Before she went to bed, Zanoba would brainwash—I mean, instruct her by means of rambling lectures on dolls and figurines. He also made her go through dexterity-developing exercises with him, probably because he still wanted to be able to make figurines by himself someday.

In the meantime, there was still no sign that I'd achieve my true objective any time soon.

Chapter 7: The Kidnapping and Confinement of Beast Girls (Part 1)

LINIA DEDOLDIA. The granddaughter of Gustav, the leader of the Dedoldia, one of the Doldia tribes acting as protectors of the Great Forest. The daughter of the Warrior Leader Gyes, next in line to be Tribal Leader.

Pursena Adoldia. From another of the Doldia tribes acting as protectors of the Great Forest. She was the granddaughter of the Adoldia's Tribal Leader Bulldog and daughter of the Warrior Leader, next in line to be Tribal Leader, Tertelia.

The Doldia Tribe were a special race among the beastfolk. Their roots could be traced back almost 5500 years to the aftermath of the first Great Human-Demon War, which had involved all-out combat between humans and beastfolk. The humans had won that war, and grown more arrogant for it, treating the beastfolk like slaves.

Faced with impending invasion, the beastfolk living in the vast lumber resource that was the Great Forest were forced to take a stand. Their alpha at the time, the Beast God Giger, marshalled the beastfolk against the despicable humans. He fought personally on the front lines, wielding his power and his wit to rescue other beastfolk while defending the Great Forest. Even after Giger passed away, the Doldia Tribe were revered as chief among the beastfolk of the Great Forest.

These days, beastfolk weren't just limited to the Great Forest, but were expanding across the Central Continent and into the Begaritt Continent. They weren't as numerous as humans, but were widespread enough that they couldn't just be ignored, and they wielded great influence among the elves, dwarves, and halflings. There was enough military power within the Great Forest to go toe-to-toe with the Holy Country of Millis, if the beastfolk so desired.

Linia and Pursena were the granddaughters of the Doldia Tribal

Leaders, directly descended from the Beast God. They would either become Tribal Leaders in the future themselves. Or at least be the wives of men who took the position. In human terms, they had the same standing as princesses—princesses no less important than those of a major nation like that of the Holy Country of Millis. That was why, when they first enrolled at the school, they had the highest social standing among the students there.

Why, then, had these girls come so far from home to study in such a distant land? Because the previous generation's prince (Gyes) and princess (Ghislaine) had been complete screw-ups, and like them, Linia and Pursena weren't very smart. The Tribal Leader Gustav ordered them to go study in a far-off land in the hope that they would find wisdom there, perhaps thinking that being in a place where they couldn't exert their authority would teach them its meaning.

However, Gustav had miscalculated. He sent Linia and Pursena to the University of Magic, assuming their positions as granddaughters of tribal leaders of the beastfolk would have no meaning there. The girls had likewise steeled themselves for discrimination, but were greeted instead by teachers who treated them with great caution and other students who tried to flatter them.

The moment Linia and Pursena understood their lineage still held weight here, it went to their heads. When they first enrolled, they'd trembled with fear around the humans, but that changed the moment they saw how timid those humans were around *them*. They soon realized that the combination of incanted magic they'd learned in class, their Vocal Magic (which had been passed down through the Doldia Tribe), dexterity, and racial strength was enough to bring even the strongest upperclassman to their knees, and with that, their behavior grew steadily worse and worse. Extortion, blackmail, bullying—they were full-blown delinquents before long, and in a year's time, had become the bosses of their own faction.

Their steady advance, however, soon came to an end. When they became second years, a princess arrived from the Asura Kingdom. The Second Princess Ariel Anemoi Asura. This woman, who had recently created her own faction and engaged in a power struggle back home, brought two guards with her and waltzed right into Linia and Pursena's territory like she owned the place. Even the professors who had been at

Linia and Pursena's beck and call now turned their attention to Ariel.

Frustrated and annoyed, Linia and Pursena endured Ariel for six months, though they weren't sure why. But their endurance hit its limit when she joined the Student Council despite being a first-year. As Ariel was showered with praise for being an honors student, Linia and Pursena, who'd been labelled delinquents, seethed with completely unjustified resentment.

They began messing with the princess and her group. It began with simple harassment, such as spitting on the floor in front of the princess and her followers as they passed each other in the hall. They would purposefully bump shoulders with her, splash her with water, and steal her underwear and dump it in front of the boys' dormitory, among other things.

The harassment continued to escalate—until their entire mob of delinquents were utterly beaten by Master Fitz, acting on his own. Rumor had it that the showdown had been a trap laid by Ariel, which didn't change the fact that Master Fitz had defeated almost twenty opponents by himself. The professors conferred, and every member of Linia and Pursena's goons were expelled—except for Linia and Pursena themselves, protected once again by their status.

Their reputation was ruined. Their minions were gone, so they had no allies left. Their social standing took a nose-dive, and the Asura Princess and her group become heroes in the student body's eyes. Though technically a special student, the princess insisted that she and her bodyguards be treated just the same as the general admissions students, which only added to her popularity.

Linia and Pursena, of course, were none too pleased. They took out their anger on the two other special students who had enrolled the previous year, Zanoba and Cliff, and once they'd soundly defeated them, went on to use Zanoba to gather information on the Princess and her ilk. For the moment, though, they made no moves toward revenge. Their conduct could still use improvement, but they were even attending lessons in earnest these days. You might even say they'd been rehabilitated.

From my point of view as a new student, the incident was only further proof of how amazing Master Fitz was. Regardless, their war with Ariel was at an end... or so it seemed.

Zanoba

A MONTH HAD PASSED since Julie became our master's junior pupil.

Master was using a peculiar method of training, claiming, "It's an experiment." At the beginning of each day, Julie would have to cast one spell using an incantation. After that, he would teach her no more incantations, but make her silently conjure clumps of earth instead. I didn't think she'd ever learn to use voiceless magic that way, but to my shock, she managed it after one month.

That was right—in just one month, Julie had successfully created a lump of earth. Without an incantation. An astonishing accomplishment.

According to Master, however, she still had a lot to learn. She'd only managed to conjure earth without an incantation that one time, and she also ran out of mana quickly. Still, compared to someone like me, who had no talent for magic whatsoever... I couldn't believe it.

"This is all thanks to Master Fitz and his advice," Master said, but he was the one teaching her, which meant he was the one who should be praised. I'd been right to become his pupil.

Alongside magic, Master was teaching Julie the language of men. She already knew bits and pieces, which made sense, given that she'd lived with her parents on the Central Continent for years. That bastard of a merchant had lied to me when he said she only knew Beast God—no, wait, he had no reason to lie. Perhaps it was just that she never talked.

Regardless, it was safe to say Julie had been a worthwhile purchase. She was a fast learner, and picked things up quickly. If I told her to bring me this or bring me that, she'd select the correct thing without more detailed instructions. She was good at intuiting what I wanted. It reminded me of Ginger.

Newly-purchased slaves were generally marked with a brand or magic seal, but Master didn't like that sort of thing, so I refrained. After

all, we'd intended Julie to be more like a pupil than a slave.

Then one day, an incident occurred.

It was late evening, and I was instructing Julie in the history and magnificence of figurines. She wouldn't be able to assist me in my massive undertaking if she lacked passion for the craft. Julie was essential to Master's grand scheme; she needed to be able to appreciate how splendid figurines were.

That particular day, I decided to use the Ruijerd figurine to illustrate the brilliance of Master's handiwork. I drew it out of a locked storage box: the figurine of a warrior who emanated a sense of power and dread, endlessly fascinating to me no matter how many times I set eyes upon it.

Master, who had been about to go back to his room, looked at it. He asked: "By the way, whatever happened to the Roxy figurine?"

The moment he asked that, cold sweat covered my entire body. The one thing I'd prayed over and over that he wouldn't ask me...and he'd asked it. I almost said, "I left it in Shirone," but that would be a lie, so I bit my lip hard and held it in. *I... will not... tell a lie.* I would never, ever, lie to Master.

Finally, I said, "The truth is... it's technically here, but..." My mouth wouldn't move correctly. My hands were shaking. If he knew what had happened, Master might renounce me as his pupil. Just the thought made my body feel as heavy as lead.

"It is? I'd like to see it since it's been so long. Will you take it out?" His voice was filled with anticipation. It made my heart hurt.

With great difficulty, I reached for one of the locked storage boxes beneath my bed. I turned the key with trembling hands and took out the contents. At that moment Master's expression froze.

"Hey, what the hell is this...?" His voice shook. It was flat, with no intonation, and yet somehow it shook.

I was close to tears. I'd never been so scared before. Master's masterpiece, the 1/8-scale Roxy figurine, was tragically broken into five pieces. Her head was ripped off, the parts that made up her clothes were smashed, her arm was broken off from the elbow, and her leg was bent at an odd angle. Only her sturdy staff had made it out safe.

“Explain this, Zanoba. You—I—come on, just what the hell is this, huh...?!” Master was angry. Master, who normally spoke in carefully modulated tones, using dispassionately polite speech, was tripping over his words. “Didn’t I tell you how grateful I was to my teacher? How much I respect her? Didn’t you understand how much I poured those feelings for her into this figurine when I made it?”

It was clear that Master was truly furious. He responded self-deprecatingly when Linia and Pursena made fun of him, got dispirited when Cliff lashed out at him, and when Luke made fun of him, all he did was look troubled. But that same man, my master, was now overflowing with murderous intent.

Terrified, Julie hid behind me. I wanted to hide, too.

“Don’t tell me... are you trying to mock Roxy? Are you actually my enemy?”

“Th-th-that’s not it!” I frantically shook my head.

Master talked all the time about Lady Roxy, about how amazing and deserving of respect she was. I sensed it wasn’t merely adoration, but something more akin to religious fanaticism. It was the same vibe I got from the Temple Knights. Frankly, I didn’t really care at all about Lady Roxy, but if I said so, Master would strike me down in anger. If he got serious, there’d be nothing left of me but cinders. I had the supernatural strength of a Blessed Child, but my body wasn’t *that* resistant to magic.

“That’s not it at all!” I stammered. “This is my most precious possession, the one I wagered when I dueled Linia and Pursena! After I lost that duel, it was tragically destroyed when they trampled it with their feet, but I absolutely did not do anything to mock Lady Roxy!”

“Duel, you say?”

I told him the rest of the story, speaking the truth with sincerity. One year ago, Linia and Pursena had challenged me to a duel. The loser would offer up the thing most precious to them, which, for me, was my Roxy figurine. I had no doubt I would win, given that I was a Blessed Child and had never once been defeated while I was in Shirone. Even if they used Advanced-tier magic on me, I was prepared to soldier through it and swing my clenched fists at them.

But the two of them used some strange magic on me. They paralyzed me, then, as I was unable to move, finished me off. I sobbed

and sobbed as I handed over my figurine. It had to be done, though. I'd lost, after all. It was my own fault I'd had such a wondrous item taken from me. Anyone who saw it would've wanted it.

But somehow—if you can believe it—those two had no appreciation for the item's value! They said things like, “What the heck is this?” and “Creepy, mew,” before dropping it on the floor and stomping on it, breaking it into pieces.

Once I'd explained it all, Master's murderous intent subsided.

“So that's what happened. I understand.” He patted me on the shoulder.

He understood! With that thought, I lifted my head—only to squeak pathetically. The killing intent emanating from him hadn't subsided at all! There was now something even more sinister about the expression on Master's face.

“You should've told me right away. If I'd known that was what had happened, I wouldn't have smiled like such a fool.” His words sounded almost gentle, but I could see right through them. Master didn't talk that much about figurines. Lately, I'd even found myself thinking he didn't love them that much. I was wrong. The feelings hidden within my Master's heart burned fiercer than anyone else's. “Let's teach those girls a lesson.”

Linia and Pursena were going to die tonight. I was certain of that.

I trembled with what I thought at first was fear, but soon realized was joy. “Yes, Master!”

With this powerful ally at my side, I could finally exact revenge for my destroyed figurine.

Rudeus

UNFORGIVABLE.

I absolutely hated bullies. I might forgive the girls for ordering Zanoba around like a servant once he'd lost to them—after all, they'd quieted down once Master Fitz did the same to them. But I could never,

ever, forgive them for not just taking something that someone else had made, but purposefully trampling on and destroying it! An outrageous show of violence! It was the same as someone taking a bat to someone else's computer! Ugh, dammit. I wouldn't let those foul girls get away with it.

It might have been just a figurine, but they'd kicked *Roxy*. That was the one thing I could never forgive. I'd chuckled at historical records of Edo-period officers making suspected Christians step on objects depicting Christ to prove their innocence, but now, I understood those Christians' feelings. I understood the insult of watching someone trample on something you believed in, right before your eyes. The truth behind the Shimabara Rebellion. The Humiliation of Canossa. The crusaders who made their impossibly long trek to the Holy Land.

Linia and Pursena didn't understand the extent to which my memories of *Roxy* had kept me going since my ED problem arose, of course. So, I needed to make those mongrels realize the gravity of what they'd done. I was going to teach them that when they lived by their own selfish whims, they would reap the consequences.

"Are you listening, Mister Zanoba?"

"Y-yes?"

"We're going to capture them alive. No killing them. They need to be punished for defying God."

"Punished? Yes, I see."

"For the moment, I think it would be best if we could capture each one of them separately."

"But the two of them are always together."

A two-man team. Animals that traveled in packs were wise indeed.

"That's true. They're not stupid, and they were strong to shut you down, albeit two-on-one. It seems this will be quite the formidable battle."

"No! I think they're no match for you, Master."

"Let's not overestimate my abilities. Victory falls into the hands of those who remain humble, after all." I was maintaining my composure. Calm and collected. Back when I was an adventurer, being level-headed meant the difference between life and death. If I kept my cool, I could

obliterate these two fiends. “Alright! Here’s my plan!”

“Okay!”

“Their battle strength is an unknown variable, but I already know their attack style. One will rapidly charge, using magic and the like to confuse their opponent, while the other uses that distraction to render their enemy powerless with Vocal Magic. It may seem simple, but they’re both about equal in strength. If they’re attacked from the rear, they can immediately switch roles.”

The one being attacked would devote their attention to dodging, while the other focused on using paralysis magic against their opponent. How had Master Fitz managed to break through their coordination? I should’ve asked him.

“But this time, it will be two-on-two. On a more level playing field, you, Zanoba, should have no trouble keeping up with them as a Blessed Child.”

“Master, you don’t even need me. You could devastate them on your own,” he said.

“Zanoba, you idolize me because I’m your master. And while I appreciate that, when it comes to hand-to-hand combat, my childhood friend who was two years older than me always beat me senseless. I’ve done a lot of physical training since then, but I can’t honestly say I feel confident about it.”

“What?! There’s someone out there that could beat you senseless, Master?!”

“Of course. At least four, that I know of.” Eris, Ruijerd, Ghislaine, and Orsted. Those were just the ones I knew of—there were certainly more out there, and no guarantee that Linia and Pursena might not be among their number. I could defeat Eris if I used magic and my demon eye, but we’d never seriously fought each other. Linia and Pursena were about the same age as Eris. It was probably best to assume they were both as strong as she was.

“You’re being far too humble, Master.”

“Zanoba, victory must be absolute. The past cannot repeat itself. Master Roxy must never again be trampled upon. To be honest, I would really like to enlist the help of Master Fitz and Elinalise, but unfortunately, they both seem to be busy. We’ll have to do this on our

own.”

Elinalise wouldn't get involved in a personal squabble, anyway. Even though she'd spent time with Roxy, she'd still probably say, "It's just a figurine. It's not as though the real Roxy got beaten up." Cold-hearted woman.

"Very well. Let's issue our challenge to them. In my homeland, it's an ancient custom to send a letter with a knife and a single flower. Among the Doldia Tribes, throwing rotten fruit at your opponent's head is apparently the equivalent method. Granted, I've never heard of this custom before, so that might be a lie. What do you think, Master?"

"We'll launch a surprise attack," I said.

"What? But isn't that underhanded...?"

"Zanoba."

"I'm sorry, I was speaking out of turn!"

Hmph. I didn't care if he thought it was underhanded. This wasn't a duel—this was a holy war. All you had to do was win!

In the end, however, I gave up on launching a surprise attack because I couldn't think of a way to deceive their keen sense of smell. We decided to simply ambush them, fair and square.

We went to a building some distance from the main school building, searched for the route to the dorms, and settled on a deserted spot. There was a forested patch by us, making this a wide-open spot with poor visibility.

We crossed our arms and stood there with our feet firmly planted. It was evening. The path was practically empty. We'd chosen this timeframe because it was when our opponents' classes ended and they left the school building. Additionally, they might have less mana at the end of the day.

That aside, we were waiting a while. The girls stayed to the very end of their classes, completely at odds with their delinquent image. They should've been blowing off their afternoon classes and gathering with the rest of their ilk in front of a convenience store. The evening

deepened and the area around us began to grow dark, swallowing the shadows cast by our bodies. I started to think it might be embarrassing if someone saw us like this, standing together in our ridiculous stances, just waiting.

And then they finally appeared.

“What’s this, mew?”

“What’s going on?”

Linia glared suspiciously as she saw us. “Hey, you two. You’re standing in our way, mew. Move aside, mew.”

She made her demands, but we didn’t move. Pursena’s nose twitched as if she smelled something. She licked the edges of her lips, grinning widely. “Linia, it seems like they want to go at it.”

Linia took a long hard look at Zanoba, who was standing behind me. Then she let out a single sigh. “Zanoba, don’t you feel embarrassed at all, mew? I can’t believe you’ve brought this tiny boy with you for your one chance at revenge.”

“Hmph.”

In response to Zanoba’s dismissal, a blue vein throbbed in Linia’s forehead. “Why, you! I don’t like your attitude, mew. Looks like you want us to break that other figurine you have too, mew.”

“Grr... Master, leave this to me.” Zanoba wore an indignant look as he stepped forward, but I grabbed him. I shared his anger. She was probably talking about the Ruijerd figurine—in other words, threatening to destroy the image of another person who’d saved my life, someone I respected and considered a friend.

“Don’t worry about it,” I said. “You have no reason to be embarrassed. They’re the ones who should be embarrassed, always attached at the hip like that. It’s almost like they want everyone to know they can’t do anything on their own.”

“What did you just say, mew...?!”

The girls radiated threat and incredulity, but I wasn’t afraid. I knew people who overflowed with far more murderous intent than them. If I’d said something offensive to one of those people, they wouldn’t have opened their mouth. They would’ve just attacked. They’d punch you, drag you to the ground, jump on top of you and start swinging their fists, all while spitting hateful words at you. These two

were chumps by comparison.

“Newbie! Stop acting so full of yourself, mew! I’ll be nice and let this slide, since you’re an acquaintance of my grandfather, but keep yapping like that and I’ll destroy you!”

What was with her attitude? She was acting like we were picking a fight with them for no reason.

“If you get it, then go on, get outta here, mew! We’re busy honor students now that we’ve given up on being delinquents, mew. Go fight somewhere else, mew,” Linia said and waved her hand at us in a shooing motion.

There was a proverb: “If you dislike a man you will come to hate everything he stands for.” Long ago I would have found that “mew, mew” pretty titillating, but right now, it felt like she was mocking me.

“Mew, mew, mew.’ I’m sick of hearing it. Are you incapable of normal human speech? The beastfolk I’m acquainted with could all converse properly. You aren’t a baby anymore, so stop talking like one!”

“Mew?!”

Linia’s mouth flew wide open. Then her pupils rapidly narrowed. An angry breath exited her lungs, and her tail stood up straight and rigid. “You bastard... I’ll strip you naked and throw water on you, mew!”

I’d had that done to me before. What a pathetic excuse for a threat. In fact, it just sounded stupid when she said it.

“Tsk. Linia always loses her temper right away... fuck.” Pursena mumbled to herself as she bared her fangs and put her hand to her mouth. I flashed back to the time that Gustav did the same thing and rendered me powerless. She was about to use Vocal Magic.

“Fwah!” As if called into action by Pursena’s movements, Linia kicked off from the ground. There was a resounding boom as she leaped to the left and disappeared.

Linia will move three steps to the side and then suddenly change course and attack.

She was fast, but I’d already activated my eye of foresight.

“Zanoba! You take care of Pursena!”

As I followed Linia with my eyes, I thrust my hand toward

Pursena. Vocal Magic was difficult to track with my demon eye. It was best to stop her before she used it, but I had no idea how the flow of mana for Vocal Magic worked, so I had no idea if Disturb Magic would do the trick. Instead, I conjured a large cloud of dust right in front of her.

“...! Geheh! Geheh!” Having drawn in a bunch of air, Pursena violently coughed out all of the dust she’d inhaled.

“Shah!”

At the same time, Linia came diving in. I could see it. Her attack was slow, clumsy, and backed by all the force she could muster. I could probably have handled it just fine even without my demon eye. She couldn’t compare to Eris, whose attacks were faster, sharper, stronger, tougher, and more bestial than actual beastfolk.

I countered her attack. The palm of my hand smacked against her chin. That was enough to make her legs jerk and wobble. I struck my fist against her temple, sending her to the ground, where I put my foot on her chest and hit her with a stone cannon. A pleasant boom echoed around us.

“Gyamew?!” Linia was out like a light.

I lifted my foot off her body, now splayed like a frog on the ground. The impact of our battle had flipped her skirt up. *Hm, so she’s wearing white ones today.*

I turned my gaze toward Zanoba and Pursena. We’d planned for him to go after the rear attacker, the one that would use Vocal Magic, and he was doing just as I’d instructed. Pursena was fleeing on all fours, and she was fast... actually, no. Zanoba was just slow. What, was grappling his only skill? He really needed to work on his running speed.

I conjured a quagmire in front of Pursena. Her feet were suddenly sucked into the mud and she faceplanted into it. At the same time, I used my magic to harden the sludge.

“What?! What is this?!” Pursena panicked, trying to pull her body out of the solid earth.

I used my left hand to aim a stone cannon at her.

“Gyah?!”

There was another satisfying boom, and Pursena fainted.

It was over.

“Phew... okay, come here!” Once we gave the signal, Julie, who was hiding in a nearby bush, jogged over to us carrying a large gunny sack. She and Zanoba worked together to quickly stuff the two beast girls inside.

What an unsatisfying fight. Was that really all there was to it? If Eris had been my opponent, she would never have taken a roundabout course and attacked me from the side. Her fist always took the shortest distance to its target. She would never have let herself be hit by my first counterattack, even if she did, she would’ve immediately fallen back to avoid being concussed by the follow-up. Even if she somehow got thrown to the ground, she’d be right back to grappling with me and launching her next attack. I’d never manage to put my foot on her chest. The moment I tried, she’d grab my knee or my ankle and snap my bones—of course, that wouldn’t have stopped my stone cannon.

Same with Pursena. If Eris had seen the ground before her turn to mud, she wouldn’t have let herself step into it. Even if she did, she’d regain her balance immediately, or stop before she went any further in and pull herself out.

Of course, these weren’t things Eris knew from the start. These were things she’d learned from sparring with me. But then there was Paul, who’d found a similar way to handle my attacks even on the first occasion he’d seen them. An Advanced-tier swordsman with ample battle experience could easily avoid something like my quagmire. I mean, even the beasts of the wild wouldn’t—actually, the straggler had gotten caught in my quagmire.

Hold on a minute. Could it be that Paul and Eris were actually particularly strong? I had been told that they were talented before, but...

“Impressive as always, Master. You didn’t even need me.” Zanoba returned carrying the gunny sack.

I turned to look at him. “I’m surprised as well.”

“You’re being humble again. Come now, let’s return to your room.”

“Okay.” We traveled down the unlit path, careful to not be seen.
“Julie, watch your steps.”

“I-I a-am.” For some reason I got the impression that there was fear lurking in Julie’s eyes as she looked at me.

Chapter 8: The Kidnapping and Confinement of Beast Girls (Part 2)

WE RETURNED to my room. Before us were two beast girls in uniforms, one with cat ears, the other with dog ears. Their hands were bound behind their backs with cuffs made of earth magic, and gags were stuffed in their mouths. Zanoba and I both sat in chairs, waiting for them to wake up.

What, you ask? Wasn't I going to take the opportunity to do something while they were out? Don't be a fool! I was a gentleman.

"Mrggh?!"

"Mmm! Mmm!"

The two of them woke. They realized the situation they were in at once, and started groaning noisily.

"Good morning," I said quietly before standing up, looking down at the both of them.

They twisted their bodies and looked up at me. There was concern in their gaze, but they were still glaring at me.

"Mmm!" A groan of resistance. They clearly didn't understand the situation they were in.

"Now then... where should we start this conversation?" I put my hand to my chin as I regarded them both. Their skirts had flipped up from all the twisting around they were doing, exposing their tender-looking thighs. Truly a sight to behold.

"Mm?!" Pursena realized what I was looking at. She wiggled her nose, sniffing, and her expression turned to one of unease. Her sense of smell told her what it was I was looking at and thinking about. In contrast, Linia seemed clueless, still glaring me down and huffing at me. It seemed Pursena had the better nose.



In all actuality, given the illness that plagued me, there should've been almost no scent of arousal coming from me.

"Hm."

It was then that I suddenly thought of something. I had two high school girls with animal ears bound before me, their clothes disheveled, completely unable to move. It was insanely stimulating. Perhaps it could cure my condition?

I'd heard Asura's noblemen were prone to perverted fetishes. It was possible that losing my virginity had awakened something similar in me. I certainly hadn't had anything against this kind of thing in my previous life, though it wasn't what I would've called a fetish, either.

My mind made up, I decided to test it out. I wiggled my fingers as I reached toward the enormous mountain range on Pursena's chest. She snapped her eyes tightly shut, a terrible look on her face, like she was being tortured. Like I was doing something horrifyingly cruel to her.

You know, there are women out there in the world that do the same thing to men's chests without showing any restraint, I thought.

That aside, her breasts felt amazing in my hands. They really were huge, after all. But I only felt a faint sense of arousal. No cries of joy from my little man, no signs that he might be waking from his long slumber.

When I released my hold on her, the arousal dimmed instantly and only that suffocating sense of loneliness remained. The same sensation I always felt. I guess this wasn't going to do the trick, either.

Pursena looked confused when I released her. She sniffed the air again and her expression turned to one of relief, before a conflicted look came over her face.

"Master? Is that how you're going to punish them?" Zanova asked.

I looked at Linia. The moment our eyes met, she glared at me angrily, so I went and felt her up too. Her chest was smaller than Pursena's, but she still had quite the impressive assets. Doldia women seemed to be well-endowed in general.

But as before, it wasn't enough to delight my tom cat. The only noticeable change was the mounting humiliation and anger in Linia's gaze.

I'd heard BDSM enthusiasts got off on watching such a gaze grow distorted as the person sank deeper and deeper into despair. I'd had some appreciation for such fetishes in my previous life, but seeing something on a computer screen was completely different from seeing it in real life. There was nothing for me to get out of this. The experiment was over.

"Do you understand why you're in this predicament?" I asked them. The girls exchanged glances and shook their heads. Linia looked ready to shout, so I removed Pursena's gag instead.

After thinking for a moment, she blurted out, "I'm pretty sure we haven't done anything to you."

"Oh, so you've done nothing to me, huh?!" I purposefully repeated her words, snapping my fingers. Zanoba timidly carried over a box. Once opened, it revealed the tragically fragmented Roxy figurine. "Aren't you two the ones who did this?"

"Ugh... what about that creepy figurine?"

"Creepy!" I repeated her words again. Was she calling Roxy creepy?! The Roxy that I'd poured such care into?! The one that sold instantly because it was such a masterpiece—that was creepy?!

No, calm down. Let's be cool about this. Deep breaths. Breathe in... and out. Breathe in... and out!

"This is a symbol of my God."

"Y-your God?"

"That's right. I was able to go out and discover the world because she saved me." I moved to the edge of my room as I spoke. There sat my altar. The altar that was the first thing I'd set up when I came to this room. I opened its twin doors and let them see the interior.

"Mm!"

"Wh-what's that?"

"M-Master, is that...?"

"..."

They were both struck by the divinity of the object of worship that was enshrined within. Even Zanoba shrank back, and Julie grabbed the hem of his shirt, looking like she was about to cry.

"That figurine was created in the image of my God. And the two

of you kicked it, trampled it, and shattered it into pieces.”

Linia and Pursena widened their eyes, looking back and forth between my face and the altar, then slowly to Zanoba and Julie, before finally turning back toward me again. Their faces had gone absolutely pale. And by pale, I mean blue. Blue like a computer bluescreening. But at least it seemed they understood what they’d done now.

“Now, do you have some way of justifying your actions?”

Pursena took a few seconds to think over my question. Then she said, “Y-you’ve misunderstood! The one who stepped on it was Linia. I told her to knock it off.”

“Mm?!”

Instead of apologizing, she made excuses. Very well then. This seemed like it’d make for an interesting spectacle, so I removed Linia’s gag. When I did, the two of them started screeching at each other in shrill voices.

“Pursena’s the one who said, ‘You don’t need something like this, it’s creepy,’ mew!”

“But you’re the one who stepped on it!”

“My foot slipped, mew. Besides, you also kicked it up in the air at the end, mew! And you giggled when you saw Zanoba searching for the fragments all the way into the night, mew!”

So he’d searched for the fragments all night—some of them, like the shattered ankle, were as small as the tip of my little finger. *Zanoba, my pupil*. My affection for him increased threefold. He was headed straight down my romance route. Way to go, Zanoba!

Anyway. Back to business.

“Shut up! You are both equally responsible.” First, I put an end to their disgraceful attempts to throw each other under the bus. Then, I declared judgment. “Heretics must be punished. That said, my religion is newly established, so I haven’t yet decided on the punishment in these cases. How would such a crime be punished in your village?”

“I-If you do something weird to us, my father and grandfather will have your head, mew! They’re the two strongest warriors in the Great Forest, so... ah...” Linia paused, seeming to remember that I knew Gyes and Gustav, too. This made me remember my punishment back in the Great Forest.

“Mister Gyes? Ah yes, I remember. He wrongfully accused me of doing something reprehensible to the Sacred Beast, so he had me stripped naked, had freezing cold water poured on me, then left me inside a cell for seven days. Right, then. Why don’t we do the same thing to you two?”

Just to be clear, I wasn’t holding a grudge over that stuff at all. I’d been a bit peeved about it at the time, but it’d been an overall enjoyable experience in the end, despite the circumstances—not that Linia and Pursena knew that. They were speechless, their faces turning ghostly white. Apparently, that method of punishment was considered a horrific form of torture to the beastfolk.

“N-no, we’ll do whatever you want, so anything but that, please, mew!”

“You can do whatever you want to Linia. So at least have mercy on me!”

“What she said, mew! You can do whatever you want to me... gwah?!”

What a farce. They both showed no signs of remorse. Particularly the mutt.

“You Doldia were cruel in your punishment when it came to your beloved Sacred Beast, you know? Granted, they did apologize once they realized I’d been wrongly accused... but in this case, the two of you are definitely guilty.”

“Please, forgive us. We didn’t know that figurine was so important!”

“I’m sure you didn’t,” I agreed.

“And we won’t do it ever again.”

As if I’d ever let it happen a second time! You could never get back something that had been destroyed. These two could never understand what it felt like to watch something precious to you be ruined before your very eyes. Even now, I remembered the sight of my younger brother smashing my computer in with a bat. I had no intention of dredging up those old feelings, but I could still taste the despair I felt at that time. The feeling of having my only source of support shattered into pieces!

“We’ll apologize, mew. We’ll even show our bellies to you, mew.”

“That’s right, it’s embarrassing but I’ll do it!”

Show me their bellies? Ah, that beastfolk form of kowtowing that Gyes did for me. An insincere kowtow wouldn’t be enough to quell my emotions.

“If you want me to forgive you, put my figurine back together the way it was!”

R-o-x-y, R-o-x-y!

“That’s right! Even Master is incapable of restoring it to its former glory!” Zanoba chastised them.

But Zanoba, my pupil, that isn’t true...

The pieces were all there, and the most important part, the staff, was completely unharmed. My skills had also improved since I first created it. I could now make figures smoother, without any noticeable lines where the segments joined together.

Wait.

That’s right! I *could* fix it. It wasn’t as if it was beyond repair.

“...”

As soon as I realized that, my anger quickly dissipated. They’d apologized, and were reflecting on their actions. Maybe I should forgive them? In fact, what I was doing right now was a crime. If word of this got out, I might be the one in hot water. Such as, for example, if a certain spear-wielding baldy were to happen upon this spectacle...

No! That wasn’t the problem here! The issue was that these two had no compunction about destroying something that was precious to someone else. And if I were to show them kindness here, they’d surely just do the same thing again! I needed to drill this lesson into them so that they understood! Upon my name as a follower of Roxy!

But now that I’d cooled down, I couldn’t think of any satisfyingly diabolical forms of punishment.

“Zanoba, do you have any ideas?” I asked.

“Let’s have them face the same fate as my figurine!” He had a ruthless look in his eye. It seemed his heart was still full of anger, which made sense—he’d witnessed the crime.

If I agreed, the two of them would likely be torn to pieces like the shattered Roxy figurine. Zanoba would violently rip them apart with his

hands. He'd become the tyrant Splatinus. He'd do it. This man would definitely do it. The Head Ripping Prince was still alive and well.

"No. Killing them would be going overboard. I don't like murder."

"Then let's sell them off as slaves. The sale of Doldia tribespeople is forbidden, but I believe there is a family in Asura with an intense love for them. Someone would surely pay handsomely for slaves like that, even if it meant breaking the treaty."

...now he wanted to start a war with the beastfolk? This was going a bit too far.

"That might be difficult, considering the family you mentioned is on the brink of destruction right now," I said.

On that note, I wondered how the Boreas family was currently doing? I hadn't heard much about them since I'd been in the Northern Territories. They were in a bad position. It seemed only a matter of time before the whole family was wiped out.

"Listen to me, Zanoba. Jokes aside, they *are* princesses. We need to choose something with a low impact, or we'll suffer the consequences later."

"You never cease to amaze me, Master. Even as angry as you are, you still have the mind to think of self-preservation."

Hmm. What to do with them? I wouldn't feel satisfied just releasing them as-is. In fact, it might be better to just keep them like this forever as a feast for the eyes. They weren't really my type, but they were still beautiful women.

No, no, no. I might have already gotten myself into trouble by kidnapping them in the first place. I couldn't hold them here for long. I could restore the figurine, and they did seem to be reflecting on their actions.

I wanted to do something to bring this incident to a satisfying end, but... hmmm.

"And that's what happened." Unsure of what to do, I had turned to Master Fitz, as had become a habit of mine lately. He had an answer

for just about anything I brought to him.

“W-wait just a second. So they’re being held in your room right now?”

“Yes, they are. Don’t be alarmed, though, I’ve already informed their teachers that they won’t be attending classes today.”

“Um, so you’re saying you captured them and, uh, confined them, with Zanoba’s help?”

That sounded about right. I’d imprisoned two animal-eared beauties. It sounded like something I’d have put on my bucket list in my previous life. Granted, it would have been for what came *after* the confinement, but that was something I was unable to accomplish in my current state.

“Rudeus, um, uh, since you imprisoned them, did you...?” Master Fitz’s face was bright red as he looked at me, eyes filled with disapproval.

Oh no, it seemed he’d misunderstood. “No, no, I haven’t done anything perverted to them.”

“R-really?” Master Fitz asked.

“The worst I did was grope their chests,” I assured.

“S-so you did touch their chests...!”

“I wanted to test something.”

“Huh..? So you didn’t touch them for *other* reasons?”

Other reasons? He was probably asking whether I’d touched them with sexual intent. I suppose you could say that I had, broadly speaking, but from my perspective, it was really an attempt to treat my condition. Just a single experiment. “No, it wasn’t for other reasons.”

Master Fitz’s expression relaxed slightly. “A-alright then. But there is one problem. Despite how they behave, they are still descendants of tribal leaders.”

“Don’t worry. I’m acquainted with the Tribal Chief and Warrior Leader.”

“What?! Seriously?”

“Yes. So if I tell them I knocked the girls down a peg because they were slacking off at school, I’m sure they’ll understand.”

“J-just how did you get to know the Tribal Chief? The Doldia are so aloof toward other races... It’s exceedingly rare to ever meet someone like the Tribal Chief.”

I told Master Fitz the story of my time in the Great Forest. I realized as I talked about it that it was quite a pathetic episode for me. I’d tried to rescue children, only to be captured, then spent every day since my release playing with a dog and creating figurines.

“Wow, you really are amazing, Rudeus.” It was a pitiful story, and yet, Master Fitz let out a breath of astonishment as I finished. What part was he impressed by? “For the Sacred Beast to take such a liking to you... That’s amazing.”

Oh, that part. Now that I thought about it, why *had* the Sacred Beast come to see me all the time? Surely, it wasn’t just because it liked me.

“I suppose even a mutt can tell when someone is their savior.”

“You better not use that word in front of the beastfolk,” Master Fitz warned.

Of course not. I’d be furious if someone mocked Roxy in front of me by calling her a disgusting demon, after all. I knew some lines shouldn’t be crossed. ‘Mutt’ was a term of endearment between the Sacred Beast and I, not a term of condescension.

“That aside, I could use your wisdom on this matter. How can I teach them a lesson without incurring resentment or revenge down the line?”

“That’s a difficult question.” Master Fitz hummed in thought. “I do agree that ganging up on someone, then destroying their belongings, is unforgivable.”

I’d thought he might tell me to just release them both, but his anger seemed to be stoked by the fact that they’d targeted someone he knew. Considering his actions in the slave market, Master Fitz might be a person with a strong sense of justice.

“Okay! I have a good idea,” he said.

A line like that was usually asking for bad luck in fiction, but oh well. Master Fitz and I set off together toward my room.

An acrid smell drifted through the air in my room. The floor was damp, the room stank, and Linia and Pursena were limp with exhaustion. Perhaps I should've let them use the bathroom.

They both looked uncomfortable, so I used magic to clear up the mess and opened the window to let in fresh air. I stripped them of their soiled skirts and underwear and wiped them down. Their clothes went in the laundry. Hey, they weren't completely naked. That was enough.

I glanced at both of their faces, to find that each had a look of complete surrender.

"You can be violent with us if you want, mew. But even if you're going to keep us in your room, at least unbind us, mew. It's painful not being able to move at all, mew. Please, we promise we won't run, mew." Being tied up for almost twenty-four hours must've been hard for a cat-type beastfolk.

"At least let us eat something. We'll be good. I won't howl at night. I won't bite you, either. I want some meat... I'm so hungry."

Apparently, Pursena was the gluttonous type. Now that I thought about it, she'd been chowing down on some meat back when we first met. Still, I couldn't believe they'd both given up after just one day. Must be the lack of food. People were weak in the face of hunger, after all.

I released them both, and they knelt in front of me. An extremely arousing sight, given they weren't wearing anything on their lower halves. My lips curled in delight at the sight, but of course, my crotch didn't show the same interest.

"Rudeus," Master Fitz cautioned. He was nearby, washing their skirts and underwear.

"Oh, right. It looks like you're both remorseful, so I'm considering forgiving you. I know that probably doesn't do much to alleviate whatever emotions you're feeling right now. It's rough not being able to move for a whole day. You must've been scared stiff, stuck in a dorm full of sex-hungry men."

"That's right, mew."

"Every time I heard footsteps, I thought it was the end..."

Actually, as far as I knew, there weren't any such men here. It wasn't like the dorm residents were being confined within these walls. If they were that horny, they could visit the pleasure district, or pay a visit to one of the recent first years, an elf woman rumored to be a beauty. Perhaps Linia and Pursena feared danger because of the resentment they'd provoked in other students? Then again, there were quite a few people who, if they found two girls tied up, would just carry them off to the slave market.

"We'll do what you say from now on, mew. We'll be your followers, mew."

"Please forgive us," Pursena added. It seemed they had given a lot of thought to their actions.

"You don't have to be my followers. But the one thing I won't tolerate is you making fun of Roxy."

They both paled and nodded quickly. "Of course not, mew. If you mock someone else's God, you deserve to die, mew."

"I remember being chased by those Temple Knights... it was terrifying," Pursena said.

"My aunt is a member of the Temple Knights, actually."

As I said that, the two girls turned an even ghastlier shade of white. Connections sure were a valuable currency in this world.

When Fitz was done, they gladly slipped their clothes back on. (Why was it so arousing, I wondered, to watch a girl put her underwear on? For me, personally, it was even more stimulating than watching them take it off.)

With the immediate danger gone, and their clothes returned, the girls regained some of their usual spirit.

"Even though I said we'd do whatever you say, anything that might result in a child is off the table, mew," Linia told me. "I want to date someone properly first, then get married and have children, mew."

"Agreed," said Pursena. "But I'll allow you to feel up Linia's boobs occasionally."

"Yeah, mew. Occasionally you can—wait, why me?!"

"I cost too much. You can only touch mine if you give me expensive meat."

Apparently, despite being delinquents, they had firm stances on their chastity. I should've expected as much, given that they were princesses. That aside, it seemed the meek attitude they'd had up until a moment ago had partly been an act. I hoped they really were reflecting on their actions.

"Careful, Rudeus," Master Fitz warned. "Don't let your guard down around them."

"Mew?! Hold on there, Fitz, don't say stuff like that, mew!"

"Yeah!" Pursena agreed.

"The boss is a monster with a few screws loose! If he defeats us again, there's no telling what he'll do to us, mew! We're not dumb enough to try!"

Who were they calling a monster? How rude. Though I'd sleep soundly at night if I knew that was what they thought of me.

"Boss, can we go home now?" Pursena asked, tilting her head slightly. Wait, why was she calling me boss? Not that I minded... "I'm hungry. I want to go back to my room and eat my stockpile of jerky."

"Yeah, we've been here since last night without any food or water, mew."

What the heck? Now they were making me sound like the bad guy. Maybe they still hadn't learned their lesson, after all.

"You haven't learned your lesson, have you?" Master Fitz said.

"Fitz, this has nothing to do with you, mew."

"That's right. Fuck off."

Master Fitz looked stunned.

"Both of you, sit down!" I yelled.

"Yes, sir!"

"Woof!"

"Master Fitz, I changed my mind. Please do as we discussed."

As the two of them sat there, their legs neatly folded before them, I gave Fitz the go-ahead and he retrieved some items from his pocket. This had been his aforementioned good idea—a bottle full of black paint and a brush.

Once it was over, my anger had almost completely dissipated.

“...Fitz, we’ll remember this, mew.”

“Fuck.”

Linia and Pursena had bitter looks on their faces. Their brows had been connected in a unibrow with eyes doodled on their eyelids. Each had a mustache painted around their lips. Finally, on their cheeks were the words “I’m a dog who lost to Rudeus,” and “I’m a cat who lost to Rudeus,” respectively.

A whole new kind of body paint. It was actually kind of arousing.

“This special paint is used by a certain tribe to pattern their bodies,” Master Fitz explained. “If I chant the right incantation, the marks will become permanent.”

Such paint actually existed? Must be this world’s version of a tattoo. Come to think of it, I was pretty sure I’d seen something similar in my time as an adventurer.

“Even water will never wash it off. If you ever turn on Rudeus, I’ll use the incantation and you’ll have those marks on your faces forever!”

“F-fine, we get it, mew. You don’t have to yell, mew.”

“We get it. We’ll obey. We swear.”

They nodded, trembling with fear. Well, their faces did look pretty gruesome. If they had that paint on them for life, it would play havoc with their marriage chances. Master Fitz was quite cruel.

“You can go home for now, but you need to keep that on your faces all of tomorrow. Then I’ll take it off. But I won’t remove the paint on your bodies for the next six months, so keep that in mind!” We’d written some pretty obscene things on their backs.

“We get it already, give us a break, mew.”

“...sniff.” Pursena had tears in her eyes.

It would raise questions if the girls were seen walking down the halls, so they left through the window. We were on the second floor, but they were more than equal to the task of climbing down—or at least, I assumed so.

Before they left, Linia turned to me as if she'd just thought of something. "Boss, you were able to predict our movements, even though you're just a magician. What kind of training did you do for that?"

"Nothing special. I followed my master's teachings and moved accordingly, that's all."

Most likely, it was proof that my training with Eris had been productive. I'd always thought of myself as weak. In contrast to how fast Eris grew, I felt like I wasn't growing at all. But maybe it was just that we were growing at different speeds, and I *had* gotten stronger in my own right, after all.

"Who is your master, mew?"

"Uh, that'd be Ghislaine, I guess."

"Ghislaine? Do you mean Ghislaine of the Doldia tribe, mew? The Sword King Ghislaine?"

"The very same." That was right—since Linia was Gyes's daughter, that made Ghislaine her aunt.

"I see then, mew." Linia looked as if it all made sense to her now. "See ya, mew."

"Later, boss. We're really sorry about the figurine." And the two of them left.

Once that was over, Master Fitz heaved a sigh. "Sorry, Rudeus. I got a bit carried away."

"Not at all. I got to see them both look terrified, so I think that went well." But more importantly... "You said something about a special incantation that makes the paint permanent. What if there's someone else here who knows that incantation, too?"

Since this was a tool that existed in the world, Master Fitz couldn't be the only person who knew the incantation. I'd feel bad for the girls if someone else used the chant on them.

"What? Oh, that was a lie," Master Fitz said coolly. "Magic paint does exist, but the one I used was just the cheap kind used for drawing magic circles. It'll disappear if you wash it away with mana."

He giggled as he spoke. Almost like a child who'd successfully pranked someone. It was incredibly endearing.

Master Fitz stayed in my room for a while. He was fidgety for some reason, as if he couldn't calm down. He wandered aimlessly about, only pausing when he found something peculiar so he could ask me about it.

"What is that? Is there something in it?" His discerning eyes turned toward my altar.

"It houses a relic of my religion's God," I replied.

"Huh? So you're not a follower of Millis, then. Do you mind if I take a peek to see what's inside?"

"It's called the Roxy Faith... please don't open that!" I hurriedly stopped him when he tried to open the altar's doors. The relic within was so divine it would be dangerous for human eyes to look upon...and it might put him off to see me keeping women's underwear. I must've lost my mind, showing it off to so many people yesterday.

"Oh, I'm sorry." He quickly withdrew his hand. As he continued to look around the room, his gaze traveled to my bed. He lifted my pillow. "This makes a rustling sound when you touch it."

"I made it myself." It was filled with the seeds of a Mustard Treant, one of the monsters that lived in the forests of the Northern Territories. If you broke the seed open there was a nut inside that looked similar to a walnut, but its shell resembled buckwheat chaff. I'd broken it down and stuffed it into a pillowcase, then covered the outside with beast fur. With that, my restful sleep was assured.

"Wow. Do you mind if I try it out?"

"Go ahead."

Master Fitz put the pillow down and settled upon on the bed. "This is a good pillow."

"You're the only one who's ever said that." Admittedly, the only other person who'd tried it out was Elinalise, who said, "I'd prefer a man's arm over a pillow."

Fitz kept his sunglasses on even as he lay on the bed. He must be particular about them. I wondered if eventually he'd let me see his face

some day. Unless those sunglasses were just a part of him. I wondered... what would happen if I reached out and took them off?

No—he'd said there was a reason he kept them on. Maybe he had a complex about his looks, for example. *Let's just forget about it*, I thought. I didn't want him to hate me.

Silence fell between us for a while. Realizing that I was looking at him, Master Fitz lifted himself up. For some reason, I thought that his cheeks looked red, but it was probably just my imagination.



“You want to see?”

My heartrate accelerated the moment he said that. What was this? Did I want to see what? What was it that he thought I wanted to see? “See what?”

It was such a stupid question. His face, of course. The answer was so obvious based on context.

“My face.”

Yeah, see. His face. Why didn’t I think of that first? Like I was anticipating he’d show me something else. He was a man, so what was I getting excited about seeing? Just what part of him did I want him to show me?

We gazed at one another through his sunglasses. I felt like my face was heating up. Maybe my cheeks were getting red, too. “I want to see.”

“Okay,” he said, placing his fingers on the edge of his frames. But they just stayed there, frozen still. His lips tensed nervously, and his hands seemed to tremble. It had the same vibe as a girl with her fingers hooked on her panties; a girl who was standing in front of a man, about to take off the last article of clothing covering her body. Somehow, I felt nervous too. No—what the heck was I feeling nervous for? Comparing this to a girl stripping was totally out of place!

Did he consider revealing his face to be an intimate act? No, that was absurd. He probably just had some prominent feature he was self-conscious about. Like a big burn scar, or eyes that bulged like a chameleon’s! Yeah, that had to be it. No doubt.

“Just...” Fitz finally spoke. “Just kidding! Sorry, but these are Princess Ariel’s orders. I’m not allowed to show my face to anyone. I have a baby face, and it would destroy the reputation I’ve built as the fearsome Silent Fitz.”

I was wrong. It was royal orders, apparently. Well, that made sense. What kind of nonsense had I been dreaming up?

“O-oh, so that’s it. Well, I have no intention of forcing your hand.”

“Um, thanks, I appreciate you saying that,” he said, hastily rising from the bed. “I better hurry to attend to Princess Ariel.”

“Alright, take care.”

“Sure thing. See you later, Rudeus.”

“Thanks for your help today.”

“No problem.” Master Fitz also slipped out the window, just as the two beast girls had done earlier. As much as I wanted to tell him to use the hallway, going out the window was probably faster if he was going to the girls’ dormitory. Oh well.

“Phew...”

For some reason, I felt kind of relieved. If Master Fitz had shown me his face... I felt like it might lead to something we couldn’t take back. It almost felt like I was being invited to step into a world that I couldn’t leave once I’d entered. A world of gay desire, maybe.

I was now alone in a room that still held a lingering beastly stench. I dusted it with some deodorizing powder typically used by adventurers, then lay in bed. My pillow smelled unusual; I assumed it was Master Fitz’s scent. It wasn’t unpleasant.

“That aside...”

I’d put myself in some pretty arousing situations with the kidnapped girls, but still seen no signs of recovery. The erotic vistas, the groping...none of it had helped. In fact, being alone with Master Fitz had more effect than anything else. I felt like crying.

The next day, we showed Zanoba the graffiti we’d left on the two before erasing it. The expression on his face said that wasn’t enough to mollify him, but I chided, “It’s not like you really helped out this time, did you?” Then I applied some emergency repairs to the Roxy figurine, whereupon he immediately broke into a smile and forgave the girls.

I also apologized to them for keeping them tied up for more than a day, but...

“It’s no big deal, mew! Nothing happened, mew, we just lost and he took us back to his room and drew on our faces, that’s all, mew!”

“What she said. Nothing happened. Really, nothing. *Brrrrr...*”

If that was the version of the story they wanted to tell, so be it. A happy ending for all.

Interlude: Sylphiette (Part 2)

I SAW RUDY AGAIN TODAY, walking down the hall. I'd been spotting him often of late. Just a few months ago, he'd been trudging along alone, but now he was usually accompanied by Zanoba, Julie, Linia or Pursena.

Even then, I couldn't talk to him. I was always busy attending to the *Princess*. I wished Rudy would be the one to reach out to me, but he didn't seem to remember who I was. Our eyes had met countless times, but he never showed signs of recognition. He must see me as nothing more than one of the *Princess's Attendants*.

In the meantime, I had to watch as Rudy and Pursena left to attend a healing magic class. Why did it have to be Pursena? Was Rudy into girls like her? Was it his relation to the Notos family that gave him a preference for big breasts? Pursena's ample bosom could be seen from afar. All beast women were generously endowed, including Linia, but Pursena was exceptional.

Linia and Pursena idolized Rudy, referring to him as "Boss." They were all special students, which made them closer. Perhaps he and Pursena were already in a romantic relationship. I couldn't think of any other reason they would be taking a healing class together.

No—Rudy was an earnest student. He could be taking the class for academic purposes. But why was Pursena taking it with him? He might be sitting next to her during class, teaching her things. Just like he used to do with me, so long ago. They might be sharing the same textbook, leaning in close... Ugh! Just the thought made me depressed.

"What's wrong?"

I snapped out of it when the *Princess* called out to me. At some point, we'd reached the student council room. We were alone now, not a soul around us.

"It's nothing." I spoke formally when other people were around, but preferred being more casual when I could. The *Princess* wouldn't

reprimand me for it.

“If you’re certain. Just a moment ago, it seemed like you were watching Rudeus.” The *Princess* smiled. A smile that wasn’t fake. A smile that implied she found watching me entertaining.

I got a bit huffy. “I already said it was nothing.”

“Every time Rudeus passes by, you track him with your eyes.”

“Am I not allowed to?”

“No, I never said that,” she replied, though her smile clouded over, as if to say, *however...* “I do feel a little irritated at Rudeus for not remembering you.”

“Huh?”

“You’ve had such strong feelings for him, all this time, but it’s like he doesn’t remember you at all.”

“Well... but, I mean, I haven’t told him my name. Who knows? Maybe he does remember me.”

I’d recognized him the moment I saw him, but he still didn’t know who I was, and that simple fact had turned me into a coward.

The *Princess* stared at me with surprise “You haven’t told him your name?”

“Uh, um... no. I haven’t told him.”

“Oh... You told me that he didn’t remember you, so I just assumed...” The *Princess* looked bewildered, glancing over at her *Knight*.

The *Knight* had a complex expression on his face, as well. “You haven’t even told him your name?”

“Well, it’s not like I have a choice. What if I tell him and he still doesn’t remember me?” I said, pouting a little. The *Knight* pulled a face that seemed to say he’d made a mistake. “What’s with the face?”

“Ah, it’s nothing.” He seemed reluctant to say it. “Princess Ariel, what do you think of this?”

“Hm, well, it seems she’s more of a coward than I thought.” Ariel whispered those words, but I heard them. Of course, I had nothing I could say in my defense. It was true that I was acting like a coward.

“Personally, considering how striking Sylphie’s hair color is, I think it’s a bit heartless of Rudeus to still not recognize her.”

“Agreed.”

I put a hand over my hair as they said that. My hair, which I’d been relentlessly teased for when I was little. Even so, there was no way Rudy would be able to recognize me from that alone.

“Princess Ariel, I’d like you to leave this matter to me,” I requested.

“Luke, do you have any good ideas?”

“He is a descendent of the Notos line. If you throw a curvy woman at him, I’m sure that will—”

“Absolutely not!” My cry echoed through the room. For a moment I didn’t even realize I had spoken. It was only because the *Princess* and her *Knight* looked right at me that it hit me—I had shouted. I instinctively put a hand over my mouth, then apologized for raising my voice at two people higher in status than me. “I’m sorry.”

Neither of them criticized me for it. Instead, they traded complicated looks and began whispering to each other. This time their voices were so hushed that I couldn’t hear the contents of their conversation. They were probably discussing how to deal with me. Or Rudy. Either way, I had a bad feeling about it.

“Sylphie,” said the *Princess*.

“Yes?”

“Can I ask you a question? It’s something I’ve asked you many times before.”

The *Princess* didn’t seem to be angry. The look on her face approached frustration, if anything. Maybe she was annoyed to hear that I hadn’t even told Rudy my name yet.

“Isn’t there something you want to do?” she asked.

“There isn’t. Right now, all I want is to work in a way that benefits you, Princess,” I said after a brief silence.

Upon hearing that, the *Princess* lifted her chin, as if she were looking down at me. It was rare for her to do this. But even though her eyes were narrowed, she was still smiling. “So that’s how you feel.”

“Is there something wrong?”

“Perhaps you haven’t realized it yet.”

To tell the truth, I knew what she was trying to say. I knew, but I couldn't answer her honestly. It would be like betraying her if I did.

"Sylphie."

"Yes?" I meekly looked up at her. When I did, she smiled. Not a fake, doll-like smile, but a relieved one, the kind I only saw once or twice a year. No, not even that often. When had I last seen her smile like that?

As I stood there, bewildered, the *Princess* said, "I won't rush you on the Rudeus matter. I don't mind if you use *Fitz*, either. Do whatever you like."

And then I remembered. I used to see her look like this more often when we first met. But I hadn't seen it since we arrived in the Magic City of Sharia. A carefree smile.

That night, I huddled in my blanket, thinking things over. I knew what it was that I wanted to do. In fact, I'd known all along. I wanted to get closer to Rudy. I wanted to become friends like we used to be, to share light-hearted laughter, to play together, to have him teach me things, to rebuild our relationship and return to what we once were. I didn't want the same kind of relationship I had with the *Princess*. I wanted to be Rudy's equal, to stand beside him, shoulder-to-shoulder.

That was what I wanted right now. No—it was what I'd wanted ever since we lived in Buena Village. But it was surely not in line with the *Princess*' objectives.

The *Princess* wanted Rudy as one of her followers, but Rudy was clearly avoiding her and her associates. Maybe he could sense her intentions, considering how smart he was. If I got closer to him, so would the *Princess*, and Rudy might misunderstand. He might think I'd just done it for the *Princess's* sake.

Or maybe he wouldn't. Maybe he'd just come to adore her like everyone else did, and serve her and assist in fulfilling her goals.

"Urgh..."

I didn't want that. Why not?

I knew the answer. I didn't want Rudy to become just like everyone else. I didn't want to see him become her follower, take a knee and receive her commands. I knew that was why she'd summoned him

to the school, and I hadn't objected at the time. But Rudy was special to me, and I wanted him to remain that way. I didn't want him to be with someone else. I didn't want him to serve my friend.

“...”

I wanted to get closer to him. I *didn't* want Linia and Pursena to get closer to him. I didn't even want him to become a follower of the *Princess*, someone I was supposed to want to help. I knew what I wanted, and I knew what it meant for me to want it.

“Urgh...”

As I reached that conclusion yet again, I was filled with embarrassment. I instinctively hugged the blanket tightly around myself and curled into a ball. I could feel my cheeks heating up as I shut my eyes.

I wanted to have an exclusive relationship with Rudy.

Epilogue

THREE MONTHS HAD PASSED since I enrolled. My school life was a monotonous one. In the morning I would wake up, train, practice my magic, eat breakfast, go to class, eat lunch, do research at the library, go home, eat dinner, review material in preparation for the following day, then sleep. Rinse and repeat.

It would be a lie to say it wasn't enjoyable. In my previous life, I'd been a shut-in. I attended junior high but not high school, and obviously, never gone to a university. This place had food I'd never had in junior high. It also had a wide variety of classes in subjects I was interested in.

Granted, this was the first time in a long time that I'd gone to school, and I might just be wrapped up in the nostalgia and the novelty of it. The shine might wear off with time—but I'd cross that bridge when I got to it. This wasn't mandatory education, and I didn't need a degree to get by in this world. There was no reason to force myself to stay any longer than I wanted to.

Besides, I was only here because there was something I needed to do. I wondered if I'd stay on once I achieved that goal? I didn't think I'd tire of this life that quickly.

In the meantime, though, my life had changed for the better in the past three months.

First there was Julie, the orange-haired dwarf slave girl that Zanoba, Master Fitz and I had purchased together. For a prince with no other interests aside from figurines, Zanoba was doing a good job of looking after her. He taught her to read and write, fed her, gave her clothes to wear, and a place to sleep. In fact, he treated her more like a younger sibling than a slave. He *had* tried to give her the same name as his deceased younger brother, so there was probably some real affection there.

Through all this, I was getting a glimpse at a more human side of him, which made me happy to see. Julie was also getting quite attached to Zanoba. She listened to him no matter what he said, and toddled after him wherever he went, like a duckling following its mother.

When she looked at me, however, I occasionally saw a hint of fear in her eyes. She was fine when I was giving her lessons, but if she messed up or couldn't do something I asked her to, she would tremble and hide behind Zanoba as she apologized to me. She acted like I was the kind of teacher who would yell at and hit their students who did something they didn't like...which I found rude. I'd never even yelled at her, let alone hit her.

Feeling a bit disheartened, I decided to ask Zanoba for his opinion. "Zanoba, why is it that Julie seems so fearful of me?"

"Hm," he said. "The dwarves have a fairy tale called 'The Hole Monster.'"

The Hole Monster, he explained, lived deep, deep within a hole from which it normally never emerged. However, it loved bad children so much that it would sluggishly crawl forth to kidnap them. If a child tried to run, the ground beneath them would instantly turn to mud and trap them, whereupon the monster would stuff them in a bag and drag them back down to its lair. The children it took would eventually reappear on the surface, but they would be so well-behaved they seemed like different people. You had to wonder—what happened to the bad children when they went down that hole?

"She probably associated you with that story after seeing what happened to Linia and Pursena."

When you put it that way...it was certainly true that I'd used my quagmire against those two, then stuffed them in a bag and held them hostage. I'd also punished them with Master Fitz's help while Zanoba and Julie weren't around, and now they were both well-behaved and subservient. From Julie's perspective, I fit the role of the Hole Monster to a T.

I knew I couldn't please everyone, but I didn't like that she was afraid of me. I decided to be extra careful to refrain from scolding her during our lessons. I'd pat her head, compliment her, and give her some candy when she did things right.

Wait, no—I didn't want to treat her like a pet, either. Hmm. This was harder than I thought.

Linia and Pursena, meanwhile, had been calling me "Boss" ever since that incident. They weren't carrying my backpack for me or tailing

me like underlings everywhere I went, but they would bow in greeting whenever they saw me, and move aside to let me pass. Somehow, I didn't get the sense they were being respectful.

"Heya. You're here early again, Boss, mew."

"Morning."

They even casually struck up conversation during homeroom, sitting close by to Zanoba and me.

"You two sure have been acting more friendly lately," I remarked.

"Would you prefer us to act more respectful, mew? We're not too great at acting all formal though, mew, so we'd probably trip up if we tried."

"Our respect is genuine. We respect the strong." Pursena wagged her tail as she said that.

It seemed Linia was warming up to me, too. While her speech patterns hadn't changed, she did at least seem to feel remorse for her actions. The fact that she didn't appear to be holding a grudge was also a relief.

More than anything, it was nice to have young girls around me. They were a sight for sore eyes, particularly compared to Zanoba. As an added bonus, the other delinquents had been keeping their distance from me ever since Linia and Pursena started acting this way, which was just fine by me.

Once I was done lazily attending my classes, I could spend more enjoyable time with Master Fitz, doing research in the library.

"Heeey, Rudeus!" The moment I stepped out of the building after homeroom, Elinalise called out to me. "You sure have made a lot of friends in a short time."

"Friends...? Oh, yeah." There was Zanoba and Master Fitz, of course, but now that she mentioned it, Linia and Pursena were kind of like friends too. Julie's circumstances were a bit special, but I supposed I could include her too. That made five people in three months.

I hadn't been looking to make friends, but I'd acquired a bunch anyway. Perhaps not surprising, given that this was a school. If I kept up this pace, I'd have twenty friends in a year. With this school's seven-

year system, I might eventually have a hundred friends.

“But they’re all girls. Not surprising, I guess, you *are* Paul’s son.”

“That’s not true. Not all of them are girls.”

“You know, Paul said something similar a long time ago.”

Wait—while Elinalise technically wasn’t a friend I’d made in the last three months, if you included her, then there *would* be more girls than boys. Granted, she was well past the age where you could call her a “girl.”

Come to think of it, my relationship with Elinalise had changed, too. We hadn’t had much contact since we started attending the school—not that we’d been particularly close prior to that, either. She was probably busy enjoying school life to the fullest.

“Miss Elinalise, it’s rare for you to come all the way here. Was there something you needed?”

“Yes. I need to borrow something.”

“You’re going to have to find someone else for that. Mine is currently out of order.” Our school lives were completely different. She was enjoying hers in a way that would’ve already gotten her arrested if this were Japan.

“That’s not what I’m asking for. I left my magic textbook back at the dorm. Could you lend me yours, please?”

Sexual proclivities aside, Elinalise was actually attending classes in earnest. I had no idea what an S-ranked adventurer like her hoped to learn, but Ghislaine had told me stories of times she struggled because she couldn’t use magic. Maybe Elinalise figured she had nothing to lose by at least learning the basics?

“Well, I suppose so. I only have one copy, though, so don’t forget it again.”

“I’ll return the favor at some point,” she said, waving as she left.

Unbeknownst to Rudeus, there were two pairs of eyes watching him. One was behind him—the gaze of a young boy who’d just left the

classroom where homeroom had been held. Appearing incensed, the boy averted his eyes and returned to class.

The second pair watched from above, from a closed-off room on the highest floor of the research building. If one were to look up and meet those eyes, they might tremble in fear or widen their own eyes in shock, for the watcher had a featureless white mask covering their face.

As Rudeus's school life proceeded smoothly, there was movement far to the east of him. Past even the Northern Territories' easternmost Kingdom of Biheiril, far across the ocean, lay an island known as Ogre Island. It was inhabited by the Ogre Tribe, a people with dark red hair and single horn growing from each of their foreheads. Their militia was led by a strong warrior called the Ogre God.

The Ogre Tribe were a race of demons who had participated neither in the Great Human-Demon War nor in Laplace's War. For that reason, humans saw them separate from the demon race, much like the dwarves or elves. However, since they generally kept to themselves on their island, their existence was not common knowledge. The only friendly relationship the tribe had with humanity was with the Biheiril Kingdom, and outsiders entering their territory were mercilessly attacked and killed.

But even this tribe would open its heart to a recognized visitor. There was currently one such person among them—a man who'd been traveling aboard a ship belonging to the seafolk when it came close to the island. Curious about the island, he disembarked. After some fuss, the Ogre Tribe accepted him as their guest.

The man found the island comfortable and settled down there.. He spoke amiably with the Ogre God, drank with the tribe, and at times, trained their young. Two years passed that way. For this guest, who'd lived several thousand years, it was little more than the blink of an eye.

One day, a letter arrived for him. He'd made an emergency request of an S-ranked adventurer, a seasoned traveler, who had sent the letter swiftly. The letter was concise: *I found the person we were looking for in one of the Three Magic Nations. In a few more months, we'll be heading for the Ranoa Kingdom's University.*

After reading it, the man stood. Having seen the contents of the letter and the look on their guest's face, the Ogre God asked, "Are you

leaving?”

The guest tossed his head and said, “Yeah. I have to go now.”

Upon hearing this, the Ogre Tribe spoke unanimously.

“We’ll be so lonely without you.”

“Please don’t go. There’s so much more that I want you to teach me!”

“Can’t you just live here? All of the village people would welcome you!”

He grunted in acknowledgment at each outburst. “Trust me, I’d like to do that as well. But humans have short lifespans. If I spend too long enjoying myself here, the one I have to meet might die on me.”

The Ogre God, leader of the Ogre Tribe, only bid him a single “Take care.”

“Well then... if that’s what our leader has decided...”

“I guess there’s nothing we can do, then.”

Though reluctant, the other ogres obeyed. A grand farewell banquet was held, and the guest and the Ogre God enjoyed a variety of special events such as wrestling matches and eating contests. Then, in good spirits, they saw their guest off—the amiable man who had suddenly showed up one day and then lived in their village for close to two years. An immortal man who fought with the Ogre God and lost, only to revive the next day and lose over and over in a cycle of death and rebirth. A great man with pitch-black skin and six arms.

“Fwahahaha! Just wait!”

He pushed his way west. One country was surprised by his sudden invasion and hurled Advanced-tier magic at him. Another prepared tribute for him. He ignored all of them and just plunged forward, heading deeper west. He crossed mountains and passed through valleys at a speed that surpassed that of the humans’ information network. By the time each country figured out what he wanted, he’d already crossed their borders and left. Further and further west he went at a breakneck speed.

His destination was the Ranoa Kingdom.

Extra Chapter: Juliette & Manners

IT WAS NOON on an ordinary day, and Zanoba, Julie and I were eating outside the cafeteria. We drew a bit of attention as we sat there, in our slightly uncomfortable chairs made by earth magic, but eating out in the sun had become something of a trend of late. Others had begun following our example and doing the same, particularly those who dined on the first floor of the cafeteria. That crowd tended to be a bit ill-mannered, eschewing cutlery to just shovel food into their faces with their hands. Not that Zanoba or I cared, but Julie might start imitating them if she kept observing this behavior—

“Ah!” Just as I’d thought—I caught her trying to eat her bacon by picking it up with her hand. I moved frantically to correct her. “Hey, make sure to use your fork.”

As I said that, her whole body trembled and she dropped the bacon back onto her plate.

Zanoba shrugged. “Master, it’s not that bad. Shouldn’t you just let her eat?”

“But it’s bad manners to use your hands to eat.”

“Hm...but in Shirone, we sometimes eat food with our hands.”

“But you generally eat using silverware, right? It’s essential that we teach her that from the start,”

I looked at Julie again, and noticed that she was avoiding the carrots on the edge of her plate. Unlike the carrots in my previous life, these were rather difficult to eat, with their strong vegetable smell and bitter taste. Even so...

“Make sure to eat your carrots, too,” I told her.

“Master, it’s just carrots, I don’t see the problem.”

“Well, I do.”

Zanoba frowned and turned sullen, his lips pursing. “Are you saying that because she’s a slave? I would understand if your reasoning was that, as a slave, she should eat everything given to her. But was it

not you, Master, who decided we shouldn't treat her like a slave?"

"That has nothing to do with it. It's... how should I explain this? If we give in whenever there's something she doesn't want to do, then she won't put the effort in when it comes to situations where she has to do something she doesn't like."

"Hm? But I have enough money that we never need to worry about not having food to eat. I might understand if we were very poor, but that's not the case, is it?"

I looked at Julie, who was staring down her carrots like a grade school student who'd been forced to stay after lunch. Her expression seemed to say she was being unjustifiably punished.

Well, maybe I was being too harsh. When I was an adventurer, I'd encountered plenty of people who ate with their hands. It was even part of the culture of some tribes on the Demon Continent. I deflated slightly as I recalled that. Maybe I was just hung up on customs from my previous life, and using that to justify being unreasonable. There were cultures in my old world that ate with their hands, too. Food items such as crab, potato chips, hot dogs and stuff... maybe I was overthinking this.

"If you insist that she must learn then I will caution her as well, but considering it's irrelevant to figurine creation, I'd prefer not to."

I still kind of felt like it might be setting a good example, but then again, there was a high likelihood she'd be leading a life where it didn't matter. People didn't care about the table manners of craftsmen. As Zanoba's employee, she would be doing business with the royal family, but if her employer Zanoba said that she had no need for them, who'd dare say otherwise?

"What's wrong?" Elinalise came up to us. She'd just finished lunch, judging by the fleck of sauce by her lips.

"We were just discussing Julie's table manners. Like how it's not good to eat with your hands, and not good to be picky about food."

"Ah-ha."

"What do you think, Miss Elinalise?"

"Hm, let me think." She took a moment to consider the question, then grinned as if she'd thought of something mischievous. "Hey, Julie, watch closely. If you're going to eat with your hands, do it like this."

She snatched a thick slice of bacon off my plate. Then she lifted it, pinched between two fingers, and started to lower it into her mouth. The way she raised her chin emphasized the pale white skin of her neck and clavicle. It was bewitching, the way she stuck out her red tongue to meet the pink bacon as it came close, making you want to lick the sauce off her cheek.

“That’s bad manners!” Reflexively I smacked the back of Elinalise’s head.

“Ah!”

The recoil caused her to drop the bacon. It arced through the air, flapping as it headed to the ground—but a shadow dashed by and grabbed it just before it landed.

“Phew, that was close.”

It was Pursena. Impressively, she’d caught the bacon in her mouth. She proceeded to greedily stuff it in and gobble it down, approaching us only once it was all gone. Linia was with her, too, a dumbfounded look on her face.

“You may be our boss, but that doesn’t mean you can waste meat like that. If you’re going to fling it around because you’re full, give it to me instead.” Pursena’s face was angry, but the bacon must’ve been delicious, because her tail was whirling like a helicopter blade.

Linia kept Pursena in her periphery as she surveyed us with great interest. “Are you fighting? That’s rare, mew, for Zanoba to defy Boss.”

“I’m not defying him,” Zanoba said. “We’re just having a difference of opinion.”

“I don’t know about that, mew, are you sure? If you upset him, he might not make figurines for you anymore, mew?”

“Hmph, Master isn’t so narrow-minded as to get that upset over something this trivial.” He glanced at me afterward as if to ask, *You aren’t, right?*

Of course not. I wasn’t even upset, just a bit disheartened. “Oh yes, there’s something I’d like to ask the two of you.”

“Mew?”

“About table manners.” I asked them what they thought about eating with one’s hands and being picky about food.

“Manners are important.” Pursena stepped forward without any hesitation, as if to say, *Leave any discussion about food to me.* “It’s particularly unacceptable to use your hands to eat during meals.”

She had a self-satisfied grin on her face as she said that...while holding a piece of dried meat that she was actively chewing on. She couldn’t have been more unconvincing if she’d tried.

“Ignoring Pursena, manners are important for a lady, mew,” Linia said. “Being picky is an absolute no-no, mew.”

“Meat is different. And you can’t talk, you left those dried grapes on your plate before.”

“Those things can’t even be considered food, mew. They’ll just destroy your stomach if you eat them, mew.”

“Sounds like an excuse.”

And now they were both glaring at each other. Asking them had been a mistake. Everything they were saying was correct, or at least it was supposed to be, yet it didn’t inspire confidence that Julie would grow into a proper lady if we followed their advice.

See, I thought, Julie looks entirely confused.

Master Fitz appeared out of nowhere. “Hm? What’s everyone gathered here for?”

“You came at a good time,” I said. “Please listen!”

“Huh? To what?”

Master Fitz was the bodyguard of a member of the Asura Kingdom’s royal family. He had to be cultured, which meant he should be knowledgeable enough to have the right answer.

“So what happened is... yadda yadda, this and that...”

“Yadda yadda? This and that? What?”

“We were discussing Julie’s table manners.”

Once I explained, Master Fitz put his hand to his chin. After humming in thought, he murmured, “Okay,” and lifted his head. “Isn’t it fine to let her eat the way she likes right now?”

“Okay, what’s your reasoning for that?” I’d thought he, of all people, would say that she needed to learn manners as quickly as possible. Just like how if you used ma-gic (ma-nners) constantly from a

young age, your ma-na pool (ma-nners pool?) would grow to two or three times the average.

“She’s learning earth magic from you, right? She’s also helping take care of Zanoba. That’s a lot. If you force her to think about etiquette on top of everything else, it might overwhelm her to the point she struggles to master any of the things you’re teaching her.”

“Ah, I see.” There was some truth to that. There was also the idea that sleep and mealtimes were meant to be periods of relaxation.

“I do think she should learn eventually, but I think it’s fine if that’s a year or two from now.”

Perhaps I hadn’t explained myself properly. I didn’t mean she had to learn them fully, just that we needed to teach her to maintain the bare minimum of—no, I guess those were basically the same thing.

“Hmm.” With Master Fitz’s opinion included, I was now at three for and three against. We were back to a tie.

I looked over at Julie, who had an anxious look on her face. What did *she* want to do? I thought it was best for her to learn table manners, and that she’d might find herself in a pickle down the line if she didn’t, but it wasn’t as their absence would be fatal. In which case, it all came down to what she wanted. If they weren’t pivotal to her survival, then what mattered was how she wanted to handle the matter.

Her decision would also break the tie.

“Alright. Julie,” I said. “You decide.”

She looked at me in surprise. The expression on her face said that she didn’t think she had a choice in the matter. Julie’s gaze travelled to each person present—Zanoba, Elinalise, Linia, Pursena, Master Fitz—and then settled back on me, looking frightened.

“I won’t be mad, whatever you decide, so choose however you like.”

“O-okay.”

Even as I said that, I found myself thinking, *Ah, maybe I screwed up*. After all, thinking about it logically, she’d avoided the carrots because she didn’t want to eat them. Leaving the matter of table utensils aside, if someone told you that you didn’t have to eat something you didn’t like, then of course you wouldn’t eat it. But oh well...

Julie grabbed her fork in her fist, as if she'd made up her mind. She stabbed it into the carrots and stuffed them all in her mouth at the same time. She pinched her eyes shut as she chewed, and after making a noise that indicated she might throw up, swallowed them with tears in her eyes.

"Gulp, gulp... pwah!"

She chugged her water, gasped, and thumped her cup back down. Then she looked at me with an accomplished expression, as if to say, *There, how was that, are you satisfied?*

"You ate them all! Very good! I'm so proud!" I was momentarily taken aback, but still praised her and patted her on the head.

"You did well! Excellent!"

"A splendid show!"

"Now she won't be scared when she has to do it next time, mew."

"That was brave."

"Aw, I'm glad!"

Everyone else seemed equally dumbfounded at first, but the compliments soon came pouring forth, almost as though Julie had summoned them from us.

"Yeah!" Julie smiled as she was showered in praise. It was the first time I'd ever seen her smiling so proudly and boastfully, and it made me glad. It might be a trivial matter, but she'd faced down something she didn't like, conquered it, and gained confidence. I felt as happy as if it had been my own accomplishment.

"Then, starting tomorrow, I'll start teaching you some table manners."

"Yes, please, Grand Master!"

I had no idea if teaching table manners to a slave was the right move. But as I watched her nod, an earnest look on her face, I did know she'd done the correct thing by facing her fears head-on.

Juliette



slave outfit



side



without sunglasses



Fitz





Pursena



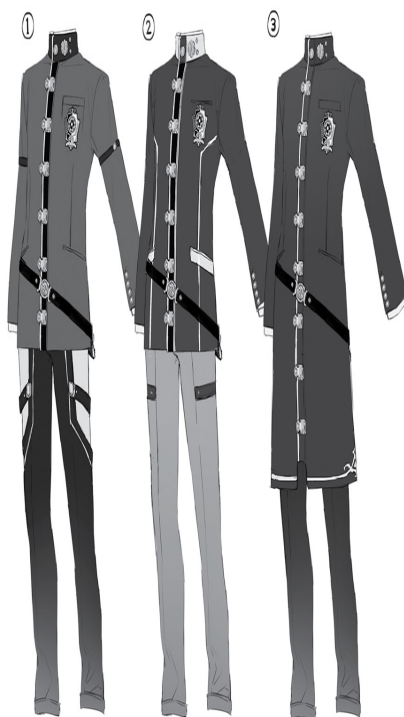
Linia

CHARACTER DESIGN CONCEPT
Pursena & Linia

Male
Uniform



Female
Uniform



About the Author: Rifujin na Magonote

Resides in Gifu Prefecture. Loves fighting games and cream puffs. Inspired by other published works on the website *Let's Be Novelists*, they created the webnovel *Mushoku Tensei*. They instantly gained the support of readers, hitting number one on the site's combined popularity rankings within one year of publication. "For the most part, everything that can be learned in society can also be learned at school," said the author, trying to sound wise.



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